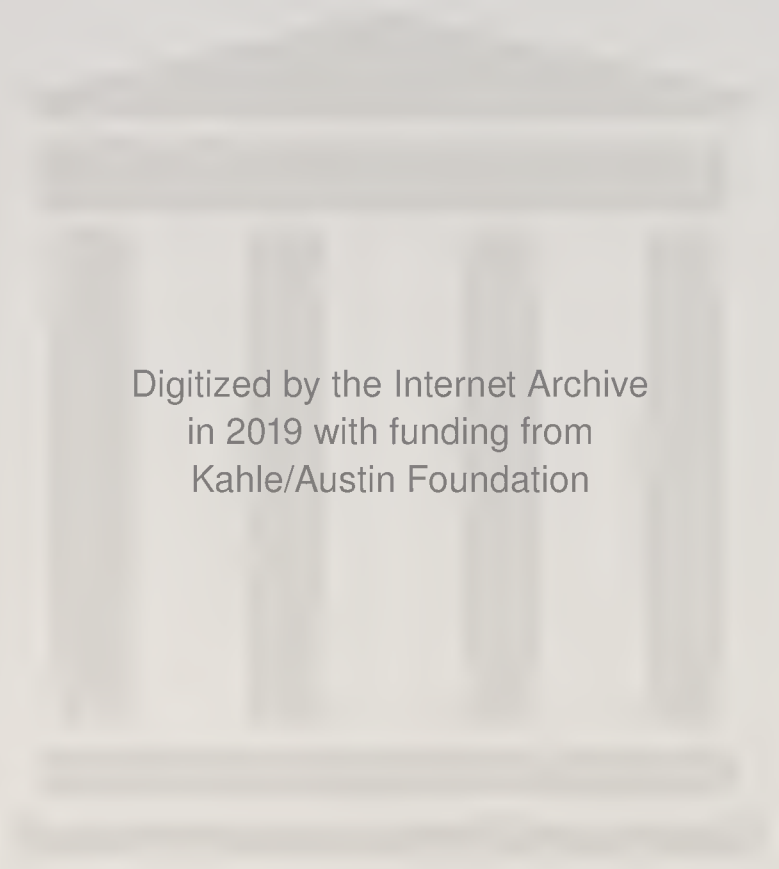


— Studies in European History —

# EUROPEAN LABOUR POLITICS FROM 1900 TO THE DEPRESSION

Dick Geary





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EUROPEAN LABOUR POLITICS  
FROM 1900 TO THE DEPRESSION

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DICK GEARY



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# A Note on References

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# Editor's Preface

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The main purpose of this new series of studies is to make available to teacher and student alike developments in a field of history that has become increasingly specialised with the sheer volume of new research and literature now produced. These studies are designed to present the 'state of the debate' on important themes and episodes in European history since the sixteenth century, presented in a clear and critical way by someone who is closely concerned with the debate in question.

The studies are not intended to be read as extended bibliographical essays, though each will contain a detailed guide to further reading which will lead students and the general reader quickly to key publications. Each book carries its own interpretation and conclusions, while locating the discussion firmly in the centre of the current issues as historians see them. It is intended that the series will introduce students to historical approaches which are in some cases very new and which, in the normal course of things, would take many years to filter down into the textbooks and school histories. I hope it will demonstrate some of the excitement historians, like scientists, feel as they work away in the vanguard of their subject.

The format of the series conforms closely with that of the companion volumes of studies in economic and social history which has already established a major reputation since its inception in 1968. Both series have an important contribution to make in publicising what it is that historians are doing and in making history more open and accessible. It is vital for history to communicate if it is to survive.

R. J. OVERY



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# 1 Introduction

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In the fourteen years before the outbreak of the First World War working men and (to a much lesser extent) women made their presence felt in the public arena of most European countries. Sometimes their intervention was explosive, dramatic and violent, as in the 'tragic week in Barcelona' in 1909, when anarchists and the authorities clashed; 'red week' in June 1914, which saw rioting and clashes with the police on the part of workers in several regions of Italy; and most impressively of all the upheavals of the Russian Revolution of 1905–6. More commonly and on an ever increasing scale, labour confronted its employers in strike action to defend or improve wages and working conditions. In France there were never fewer than 500 industrial disputes in any year between 1900 and 1915, and some of the largest were national in scale. German employees articulated their grievances in ever greater numbers, with 681,000 taking part in strikes in 1910 and over 1 million in the peak year of 1912. The previous year had seen the first nation-wide rail strike in Britain, where even more workers downed tools in the following twelve months [24; 93; 150; 220]. The representation of working-class interests did not remain restricted to relatively short-term industrial action, however, but increasingly assumed organisational shape in the form of trade unions. The strongest trade union membership was to be found in Britain, where over 4 million men and women had been mobilised in the unions on the eve of war. From much later beginnings the German trade union movement also enjoyed a good deal of success, recruiting 2.6 million members in the Free (socialist) Trade Unions in 1914, while at the same time around 1 million French workers were unionised [57; 63; 96; 118]. The relationship between the *industrial* organisation of labour and *political* mobilisation was never simple and varied from country to country, as well as

within each nation. Yet workers also entered the political scene with a vengeance in the years before 1914. By the end of 1910 forty-two Labour Party candidates had won seats in the House of Commons. Four years later the French Socialist Party (*Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière* – SFIO) had 91,000 members and was winning around 1.5 million votes in national elections. The Austrian Empire witnessed the emergence of its Social Democratic Party as its second largest party, and Germany's Second Reich produced the largest socialist movement in the world, with over 1 million individual fee-paying members and electoral support from more than 4 million voters. This huge organisation often provided the model for social democratic parties elsewhere in Europe, in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, and most famously Russia, as well as Austria-Hungary [39; 42; 75; 120]. It is tempting to see all of these developments as an automatic consequence of the processes of industrialisation, urbanisation, the spread of literacy and the extension of the franchise to ever broader sections of the population in some, but by no means all, European countries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Obviously such developments did facilitate the development of collective action and shared awareness; the growth in strike action and trade union organisation was a more or less universal phenomenon. However, the same is far less true of the emergence of working-class political parties. A comparison with the USA shows that in some countries *independent* labour politics was no necessary consequence of industrialisation and the problems it spawned; for there working-class voters were largely absorbed into the existing cross-class party-political system [18]. Even in Britain the creation of the Labour Party, in any case relatively late in the day by continental standards, did not prevent a majority of enfranchised workers continuing to vote for the traditional parties, more usually the Liberal Party but sometimes for the Conservatives, before the First World War [63]. Furthermore, where European labour did resort to independent politics, the hue of these politics varied enormously both from country to country and within each country; any attempt to explain these differences by purely economic factors is doomed to failure. The British 'labour aristocracy' (relatively well-paid skilled

workers) may have been 'liberal' or 'lib-lab' in orientation, but its German, Austrian and Russian counterparts gave their support to socialist parties ostensibly committed to Marxist ideologies.

Similarly the idea that the creation of working-class political parties is a simple consequence of the deprivation engendered by the industrial revolution is one that does not stand up to close scrutiny. The most sustained advance in the membership of working-class political parties took place at a time of *rising* living standards; those who formed the rank-and-file of political organisation in 1914 were recruited not from the most impoverished sections of the labour force (women, rural labourers, unskilled workers) but from those in a stronger position in terms of pay and security: skilled workers [7; 63; 77; 86; 144]. Thus although no 'workers' were genuinely affluent before 1914, although there were still huge disparities in wealth in all countries and most workers experienced insecurity through the prospect of unemployment or old age; and although labour and socialist movements were committed to the destruction of economic and social inequality, the emergence of working-class parties cannot be reduced to some kind of gut reaction to poverty. It and the precise ideological stance of the various national labour movements were far rather the result of the *political systems* within which they developed.

This short study cannot hope to describe the evolution of working-class politics in several countries, let alone all, in any detail. What it will attempt to do is to examine some of the key questions in the history of European labour politics between 1900 and the early 1930s. Why did workers resort to independent politics in some countries and not in others? Why were their politics revolutionary in some places, committed to the destruction of the existing social and political order, and 'reformist', seeking change through the established order and in piecemeal fashion, in others? Why were skilled workers foremost in the labour organisations of virtually all countries?

Although the representatives of labour were largely excluded from positions of political power before the outbreak of war in 1914, the early twentieth century was a period of hope, in the sense that working-class political parties were expand-



ing their membership rapidly and were clearly a force with which either ruling elites or competing parties had to come to terms. Many party members, especially those who subscribed to a vulgar form of fatalistic Marxism, believed that history was on their side [116]. In fact labour representatives were taken into the War Cabinets of France and Britain during the First World War in recognition of the importance of working-class support for the national war effort. The dismal days of deprivation during the great conflict obviously led to a dampening of labour aspirations, especially as internationalism had revealed itself impotent in the face of patriotism, or, even worse, chauvinism; but the Russian Revolutions of 1917, the collapse of the Austrian and German governments in the following year, the advent of labour or socialist administrations on several occasions and in several places between the wars seemed to promise a new and glorious future for the European working class. For many, however, developments in Soviet Russia were at best a disappointment, at worst a betrayal. Revolutions in Germany, Austria and Hungary did not overthrow the capitalist system. The welfare reforms of social democratic administrations proved short lived in the Weimar and First Austrian Republics. In most of Eastern Europe, authoritarian and anti-socialist regimes seized power in the 1920s, as they did in Portugal and Spain somewhat later. Mussolini's Fascists and Hitler's Nazis destroyed what had seemed to be powerful labour movements and terrorised many of their members. Chapters 3 and 4 seek to explain why the socialist aspirations of so many European workers were never realised and why division and defeat became the lot of so many labour movements in inter-war Europe. Even in France and Britain, where the democratic polity survived and the political representation of the working class was not forcibly destroyed, electoral successes remained limited in scope and time. History was certainly *not* on the side of labour then. No more is it now.

Older histories of labour politics tended to concentrate their attention either on intellectual/ideological debates, on the lives of great political 'leaders' or on specific political institutions. Thus there are innumerable discussions of the intellectual arguments between Marx and Proudhon, Marx and

Bakunin, of the thought of Karl Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin and Antonio Gramsci. We have biographies of these figures, of Ferdinand Lassalle, Jean Jaurès and a host of other politicians. How much these actually tell us about the politics of the ordinary men and – to a much lesser extent – women who formed the rank-and-file of labour organisations is, however, something of a problem. There is considerable evidence that intellectual debate mattered little to the party faithful in many cases and that the works of the socialist thinkers did not constitute their staple literary diet. There were also many cases in which the ostensible ‘leaders’ of the European working class either failed to lead or were not followed by their supposed supporters [8].

If the role of ideas and individuals in mobilising the support of labour has increasingly been thrown into question, then the attention of historians has had to direct itself more and more at the lives of those who formed the rank-and-file of what were in many cases mass working-class political organisations. This has led amongst other things to the development of ‘history from below’ and the ‘history of everyday life’. Exhaustive investigations of real wages and living standards now exist, though the extent to which such raw economic data determine the *political* identity of workers can easily be exaggerated. The role of skill and occupational factors in the formation of labour organisations has come to be seen as crucial, as have changes in the structure of work. As a result a multitude of studies of miners, glassworkers, engineers, building workers, and so on has come into existence and often seeks to explain the propensity to organise in terms of the work experience of such groups. Other historians – in fact an increasing number – turn less to experiences of work in the factory than residential factors outside the workplace to explain different degrees of solidarity and class consciousness: for workers living in some kinds of communities were much more likely to turn to radical politics than those living in others. The role of religious confession in determining the political choices of labour are also given increased emphasis, as is that of gender: it remained the case throughout the whole period covered by this book that women were far less likely to organise than their male counterparts.

The role of these various factors in shaping working-class politics between 1900 and the world economic crisis of 1929–33 is not ignored in what follows. Yet the world of politics was and is far more than the economic and social experiences of everyday life. Specifically *political* factors (the franchise, the behaviour of political elites and ruling classes) were arguably the decisive factor in determining the politics of European labour.



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## 2 The Rise of Labour

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### Varieties of labour politics before 1914

The industrial organisation of labour into trade unions and participation in strike action followed roughly similar patterns in most European countries prior to the First World War. The same cannot be said of the *political* mobilisation of labour, levels of which varied enormously from one country to another, as did the ideological position adopted by various working-class parties.

The British Isles experienced a fair share of working-class militancy in the first half of the nineteenth century, characterised by the violence of Luddite insurrection and the more radical (and more working-class) wing of the Chartist movement, which demanded economic and social as well as political reform and sometimes spoke in the language of *class*. It was also no accident that a distinctly socialist critique of *laissez-faire* economics, expressed for example in the writing of Robert Owen, emerged at precisely the time of a supposedly 'reformed' Parliament (after the Great Reform Act of 1832), which in fact introduced the hated New Poor Law. This was also a period that witnessed a large degree of governmental hostility to labour organisation. However, Victorian and Edwardian Britain provide the classic case of a labour movement committed to 'reformism', to the defence of working-class interests but within the framework of the existing social and political order. Certainly this generalisation overlooks a degree of 'radicalism' amongst some sections of the labour force. The strike wave of 1889–93 and the emergence of 'new unionism' at the same time, which embraced broader and less skilled employees, witnessed some socialist involvement. Industrial militancy after the turn of the century also took a more aggressive form: miners rioted in 1908, dockers

and troops clashed in Liverpool three years later, and the period 1911–14 has been seen as one in which labour protest assumed a ‘syndicalist’ nature. Some groups of Welsh miners and dockworkers throughout Britain, together with railway workers, became increasingly restive and critical of cautious trade union leadership. However, most commentators agree that this wave of industrial action was primarily ‘economistic’ in motivation, that it was primarily concerned with pay and working conditions and in no sense constituted an assault upon the political system or an harbinger of revolution [57; 63]. Similarly it is true that the origins of the Labour Party lie in part in the formation of socialist groups such as H. M. Hyndman’s Social Democratic Federation (SDF), the Socialist League of William Morris, which had split from the SDF, and the Fabian Society. Such organisations, however, were never purely working class in social composition and they remained numerically tiny: the SDF’s membership before 1900, for example, was just over 3,000. Arguably more important was the Independent Labour Party of Keir Hardie, which did establish a base in the North of England and Scotland amongst factory, mill and mineworkers. Yet its support was restricted to those regions and some parts of London until 1900, when it could muster a membership just short of 11,000. The real key to the emergence of independent labour politics of any scale and significance in Britain lay in the conversion of the powerful trade unions to political representation. An employers’ offensive against the unions and above all a series of adverse judicial decisions (which made the latter liable to damages as a result of industrial action and severely restricted the right to picket) led the Trade Union Congress of 1899 to establish a Labour Representation Committee to see to the election of labour delegates to Parliament. In 1906 the thirty labour delegates in the House of Commons from the unions and the various socialist groups joined to form the Labour Party, which in the January election of 1910 secured over half a million votes [42; 59; 63]. What should be noted about this development, however, is that the Labour Party was a loose federation of union representatives and members of the small socialist groups with no national or constituency organisation and no agreed pro-

gramme. Its foundation did not signal a commitment to radical politics but was rather the consequence of the desire of the trade unions to secure their interests. Its base was concentrated in a few areas (parts of London, the West Riding of Yorkshire, the textile and engineering towns of Lancashire and above all the mining areas of Scotland, North-East England and South Wales). It was a party of the unionised male worker and never entered more than seventy-nine candidates in any pre-war general election; nor did it ever win more than 8 per cent of the popular vote. Indeed many of the seats won by Labour in the pre-war period were thanks to an electoral pact with the Liberal Party. Most enfranchised working men continued to give their votes to the Liberal or Conservative Parties; with the exception of Manchester the urban conurbations remained outside the grasp of the new party [42; 63].

There could be no greater contrast with the British case than developments in Imperial Germany. As early as the 1860s two independent working-class political parties had come into existence. By 1869 both subscribed to some form of admittedly eclectic socialist ideology; in 1875 they came together to form the Social Democratic Workers Party, subsequently to become the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). The SPD became the largest socialist party in the world, with over 1 million individual members and an electorate in excess of 4 million. In some of the large industrial cities of Protestant Germany it had captured as much as 60 per cent of the popular vote by 1912, and this with a programme since 1891 of – at least ostensibly – revolutionary Marxism. The party's Erfurt Programme stated that the proletariat would win political freedom and social equality only with the overthrow of capitalism and the socialisation of the means of production [118; 119; 120; 138].

The SPD was far more than just another political party. It developed a massive empire of ancillary educational and leisure associations which involved some sections of the German working class from the cradle to the grave. There were workers' sports, gymnastic, cycling, rambling, chess, Esperanto and smoking clubs; the Federation of Workers' Choral Societies could boast a membership of almost 200,000

on the eve of the First World War [117; 120]. Clearly, therefore, German socialism was able to mobilise far more support and a qualitatively different form of support compared to the puny British sects.

This is not to say that all German workers were revolutionary Marxists. First, it is almost impossible to know what the party programme meant to the ordinary working-class member. Second, there were areas of the Second Reich in which social democratic organisations adopted a relatively reformist stance and were much more prepared to co-operate with the local bourgeoisie and come to terms with the semi-authoritarian political system, as in the south-western state of Baden. The functionaries of the Free Trade Unions, who played a major role in the formation of party policy after 1902, were also more concerned to resolve 'bread-and-butter' issues than dream of distant revolution; while a group of 'revisionist' intellectuals in the SPD around Eduard Bernstein became increasingly critical of the party's official Marxism and advocated cross-class collaboration. These revisionists, who included Kurt Eisner and several other prominent intellectuals in German Social Democracy, rejected the concept of 'scientific' socialism and stressed its ethical basis. They thus abandoned any idea that history was on the side of proletarian revolution and that capitalism would one day collapse. As a result they advocated that the SPD abandon its class isolationism and revolutionary aspirations in order to achieve reforms within the prevailing system in collaboration with progressive elements of the German middle class. These propositions met with strong resistance from Karl Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg, and were decisively rejected by the party congresses of 1899 and 1903.

Thus even social democracy was internally divided. Furthermore, significant sections of the German working class remained outside or even hostile to the socialist camp before 1914: Catholics formed their own unions and voted for the Centre Party in the main, Poles within the Empire established their own organisations, white-collar workers formed anti-socialist unions [118; 119; 138]. And yet it remains the case that Marxism remained the official ideology of the SPD, many of whose branches could demonstrate a radical continuity



from the pre-war period to the Revolution of 1918, and that several 'revisionists' were expelled from the party. The SPD clearly was more radical than the institutions created by British labour and infinitely more successful in mobilising numerical support through the deployment of the language of *class* [18; 22; 23; 60; 62; 117].

In Scandinavia, as in Switzerland and Austria, political parties were formed often in conscious imitation of the German model and with similar programmes, though the degree of radicalism varied. The Norwegian Labour Party was relatively moderate from its foundation in 1887, though it had to cope with the emergence of a more radical 'maximalist' wing and militant youth movement with the onset of rapid industrialisation shortly before the war. Conversely the Social Democratic Parties of Sweden and Denmark were moving towards an alliance with liberal and radical parties shortly before 1914 with a view to bringing about constitutional change [19]. Less moderate was Finnish Social Democracy, as was – most famously and with the greatest implications for the future – that of Russia. The Russian Social Democratic Party grew rapidly in the urban centres of Moscow and St Petersburg in the 1890s as the revolutionary strategy of the Populists met with failure: assassinations had not changed the system, the peasantry was at this stage unheeding of calls to revolution, while industrial growth indicated the need for a new strategy. The party split into Bolshevik and Menshevik wings in 1903 over organisational questions: Lenin and his Bolshevik comrades wished to introduce stringent conditions of party membership embracing only committed revolutionaries. The ideological gulf between the two groups subsequently widened with the Bolsheviks more willing to concede a revolutionary role to the peasantry and less convinced of the revolutionary credentials of the Russian bourgeoisie than the Mensheviks. None the less the two groups both subscribed to some form of Marxism, both played a role in the Revolution of 1905 and in fact they often collaborated at a local level. It was only with Lenin's conversion in April 1917 to what had formerly been Trotsky's conviction that the time was ripe for *socialist* revolution in Russia, that the 'bourgeois' stage could be leaped over, albeit in the context of international prole-

tarian revolution, that the gap between Mensheviks and Bolsheviks became unbridgeable. In the mean time the Bolshevik group saw a significant rise in its support in the urban centres as peasants streamed into the new factories in a period of rapid industrial growth between 1911 and 1914 [166; 173; 179; 182; 199].

Of the Latin countries France saw the emergence of the largest socialist movement in the shape of the French Section of the Workers' International (SFIO), formed in 1905 from a plethora of former socialist groupings – the *Parti Ouvrier* of Jules Guesde, the Possibilists led by Paul Brousse, and a group of parliamentary deputies, the most famous of whom was Jean Jaurès. Thus the SFIO was no monolithic organisation committed to a single platform. As Roger Magraw writes, it 'was a broad church holding together an uneasy alliance of reformists (A. Thomas), Republican-Marxists (Jaurès), Marxist-Republicans (Vaillant), Guesdists, quasi-syndicalists (Lagardelle), and anti-militarists (Hervé)'. By 1914 this strange amalgam had 91,000 members, could mobilise just under 1.5 million voters in elections to the National Assembly and as a result won 100 seats therein [75; 83; 86].

Even as far as radical working-class politics was concerned, however, the SFIO did not enjoy a monopoly of proletarian support. Among some sections of the French working class there existed the belief that political, and especially electoral, involvement would necessarily lead to corruption and disappointment. Rather working-class liberation would come from the organisation and action of working men (the syndicalist movement was noted for its anti-feminism) at their place of work. Built partly on the earlier theories of Joseph Proudhon and the subsequent writings of Georges Sorel and Fernand Pelloutier, the anarcho-syndicalist movement, centred on the Confederation of Labour (CGT), subscribed to the belief that the overthrow of the capitalist system would come about as a result of a revolutionary general strike. There is now considerable debate about whether the rank-and-file of French trade unionists ever took the above ideology seriously; but there is no doubt that the split between the industrial and political wings of labour, as well as the internal divisions of the SFIO, was a source of weakness [83; 96]. So was the fact that

significant sections of the French working class continued to support the Radical Party, a party of largely middle-class support committed to democratic politics and some limited social reform [83]. A similar division between anarchism and socialism was to be found in Spain on the eve of the First World War. The Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) was founded by Paul Lafargue, Marx's son-in-law, in 1871 but for a long time its support remained restricted to Madrid and especially to the highly organised printing trades, though it subsequently developed organisations in the heavy-industrial and mining regions of the northern Basque provinces and the Asturias, its major growth there, however, only coming after 1910. Of far more significance in Spain was the anarchist National Confederation of Labour (CNT) with its centres of support in the Catalan textile industry and rural Andalusia. Even here, however, there were significant variations in the kind of anarchism pursued [210]. That of the rural labourers on the huge *latifundia* of Andalusia tended to be elementally violent and sporadic, resting on beliefs in ancient collective rights to land. It had little in common with the syndicalist organisation of Catalan textile workers.

Regional diversity was equally marked in the politics of the Italian labour movement before 1914. Syndicalism enjoyed some degree of support in the south and amongst certain groups of workers such as dockers. In the north the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) really got off the ground in the 1890s on the basis of pre-existing associations of skilled workers. It soon established a solid basis amongst textile workers and subsequently those employed in engineering in the Milan–Genoa–Turin triangle. The PSI also had considerable success in mobilising rural labourers and sharecroppers in northern Italy, was able to form administrations in several cities in 1913, and by that time was winning 17 per cent of the popular vote, making it the largest opposition party in the country. Again, however, it was a party far from united, one split between reformist, ‘maximalist’ and syndicalist wings [144; 150; 158].

The political mobilisation of labour thus took different forms and adopted a variety of ideological stances in the various European countries. Before going on to explain this



diversity, two points should be noted. The first is that scarcely any socialist party in continental Europe was uniform in its views as to both strategy and aims. In Russia and also in Holland, though for different reasons, the socialist movement had already split before the war [179]. In German Social Democracy revolutionary Marxists and radical party branches shared the same organisation with reformist trade unionists and southern Social Democrats, as well as revisionist intellectuals. The French labour movement was characterised not only by the split between socialists and syndicalists but also by the numerous divisions within the SFIO described above: Marxist Guesdists, reformist Possibilists, non-sectarian 'independent' socialist parliamentarians. The conflicts within Italian socialism were becoming more, not less, intense between 1911 and 1914. All of this was extremely important for the future; for the division of the European labour movement into hostile communist and social democratic wings after 1918 was not simply a consequence of the war and the Russian Revolution but was built at least in part on these pre-war fissures [7; 17; 20].

Second, it may be objected that an attempt to arrange the political stance of national or regional labour organisations along a spectrum running from 'radicalism' to 'reformism' is in itself flawed. The present author has pointed out that the same group of workers could be 'reformist' in one context and 'radical' in another, and that it is almost impossible to pigeon-hole the attitudes of working-class men and women into categories invented by intellectuals [8]. None the less, workers did mount barricades in Russia, Germany, Austria and Hungary, but not in Britain. Socialist parties were more popular in some places than others. And these things need to be explained. A more pointed objection, and one raised frequently, is that the commitment of continental socialist parties to revolutionary and Marxist doctrines was superficial, something of a sham, not representative of the views of their rank-and-file, and in any case such commitment was weakening between 1890 and 1914. According to this view the European labour movement underwent a process of 'embourgeoisement', of de-radicalisation.

This process is supposed to have been caused by rising



living standards, political liberalisation (for example the expiry of the anti-socialist law in Germany in 1890, the extension of the franchise in Italy, the beginnings of welfare legislation in several states, the abolition of anti-union laws in many places) and the bureaucratisation of trade union and party organisations, giving the functionaries a stake in the system. Evidence of it is seen in the increasing concentration of syndicalist unions in France on immediate economic issues, the growing emphasis placed by the SFIO on electoral success, the existence within the PSI of a reformist wing prepared to work with the liberal Prime Minister Giolitti, the fact that until 1914 Spanish socialism was predominantly reformist, and the rise of revisionist and reformist influences within German Social Democracy [96; 136; 138; 150; 204; 219]. This view needs a good degree of qualification. It does so above all because of the very fragmentation of working-class politics described above. Although the Russian working class clearly was revolutionary, and that of Britain manifestly reformist, labour in Spain, Italy, France, Germany, Holland and Norway was clearly divided in its views for reasons to be discussed below. Out of this division arose the tragic conflict between different wings of labour between the wars [7; 20].

## **Explanations of diversity**

It may seem obvious that levels of working-class radicalism corresponded to the degrees of deprivation suffered by workers. Thus the reformism of British labour seems to have something to do with the fact that its bearers were almost certainly the best paid of all European employees. Conversely Russian workers were clearly amongst the most impoverished and at the same time revolutionary. This simplistic equation breaks down on closer scrutiny; for amongst the leaders of working-class revolution in Moscow and St Petersburg in 1917 were 'labour aristocrats', relatively well paid (by working-class standards), skilled workers in the engineering industry [189; 197]. In Imperial Germany the rank-and-file of the SPD was recruited from the skilled trades and not the most impoverished; again fitters and turners in engineering were prominent

in the revolutionary upheavals at the end of the First World War [13; 54; 112]. The French labour movement was equally dominated by craftsmen, who were more inclined to revolutionary syndicalism than the less skilled [77; 86]. Not only was there little correspondence between working-class radicalism and poverty in structural terms, but also the chronology of socialism in continental Europe suggests there was no direct link between poor living standards and the turn to radical politics; the growth of European socialism between 1850 and 1914 corresponded in the main to an improvement in working-class conditions [7; 86].

This is not to say that the lot of the European worker was in any sense tolerable by the standards of today. Income differentials were massive and on the continent at least profits rose faster than wages before 1914. The real value of those wages was also threatened by inflation, especially between 1910 and 1914. The power of workers in the labour market was also increasingly restricted, especially in Germany, by the growth of employers' organisations and the successful implementation of lock-outs, black lists and the like. Most workers experienced insecurity as a result of periodic unemployment during recessions, illness and above all old age, when earnings could decline dramatically [27; 118]. An affluent working class certainly did not yet exist: labour entered the world of politics to gain both economic and social equality. This said, it remains the case that there was no direct correlation between standards of living and political radicalism; although inequalities existed in all societies, the way in which workers sought to rectify their grievances varied from one state to another. This still needs to be explained.

If living standards do not provide the key to the presence or absence of a politically radical working-class consciousness, then a tempting alternative might be found in the role of intellectuals and ideology. The relative absence of a revolutionary intelligentsia in Edwardian Britain, where reformist attitudes predominated, can be contrasted with the revolutionary upheavals in Tsarist Russia, where to be an intellectual was almost by definition to be radically opposed to the existing social and political order. The significance of a revolutionary intelligentsia for the development of a socialist

working-class consciousness was adumbrated by the German Marxist Karl Kautsky around the turn of the century [116] and developed by Lenin (with explicit reference to Kautsky) in his pamphlet *What is to be Done?* in 1902. Both argued that, left to their own devices, workers would adopt no more than an 'economistic' consciousness, one concerned with immediate bread-and-butter problems, one which could sometimes divide labour along sectionalist lines, and one that would not see the necessity of political action on the part of a united working class to overthrow the capitalist system. This revolutionary consciousness, therefore, could be instilled into the proletariat only 'from without', by revolutionary intellectuals.

The problems with such an argument are massive. The *changing* ideological identity of working-class politics in some countries over time suggests that labour's response to theoretical messages is primarily dependent upon the circumstances in which it finds itself. Thus there was a relatively favourable reception of radical ideas by some groups of British workers in the 1830s and 1840s; yet the later predominance of reformism clearly correlates with rising living standards and more significantly the emergence of an increasingly liberal state that was prepared to tolerate and under certain circumstances even encourage labour organisation. In Germany it was clearly no accident that Marxism became the dominant ideology within the social democratic movement at a time of rapid industrialisation, economic depression (1873–96) and capital concentration, and above all of governmental repression in the years of the anti-socialist laws (1878–90). In short, ideologies make way where circumstances allow.

A further problem with ideological explanations of the nature of working-class politics resides in the gulf that often separated workers from party intellectuals, a gulf which was the cause of numerous tensions in the history of Russian social democracy, with intellectuals despairing of the narrowness of workers' concerns and workers complaining of being treated like 'cannon-fodder' [182; 200]. The precise significance of party ideology for the rank-and-file is almost impossible to determine. In the German case we know that most workers did not borrow literature from party and trade union libraries. When they did, then they were much more likely to borrow

works of evolutionary biology or historical fiction than the Marxist classics. In France one of the leaders of the supposedly anarcho-syndicalist CGT disclaimed any knowledge of its theoretical literature, while the behaviour of the rank-and-file of the movement appears to have differed little from that of the members of organisations that were not syndicalist. Furthermore the first steps in political education for many workers took place at local level, as in Britain, France and Italy, where labour politicians enjoyed greater influence in municipal decision-making than at a national level [7; 8; 23; 96; 136].

Classes and class consciousness are shaped by the *interaction* between different social groups. It may be profitable to ask, therefore, if the behaviour of other social groups and in particular their attitude towards labour helped to shape different forms of working-class politics. Obviously any generalisation about *the* bourgeoisie is at least as dangerous as any about *the* working class; but it is the case that the attitude displayed by members of the middle class towards workers and their organisations did display certain contrasts from one country to another. In general it can be said that the more liberal and tolerant the middle class, the less likely was radical independent working-class politics. Here Britain provides a classic example in the Victorian and Edwardian periods. The British bourgeoisie remained committed to democratic politics, its parties sought to woo workers and in the case of the Liberal Party actually helped the emergent Labour Party after 1900 with an electoral agreement. British employers were unusually tolerant of union organisation, though by no means invariably, and willing to reach collective wage agreements in many cases, unlike most of their continental counterparts [27; 48]. Under these circumstances the reformism of most British labour leaders is not difficult to understand. In France a more radical labour movement with Marxist and anarcho-syndicalist wings arose in part as a result of its 'betrayal' in the revolutions of 1789, 1830 and 1848, when the fruits of victory seemed to bring benefits only to the bourgeoisie, which then turned on its former partner with violence, as in June 1848 and even more so in the aftermath of the Paris Commune of 1871. Yet the French working class also produced its reformists and 'Possibilists'



and was never uniformly revolutionary in its aims. Again this may be related to the fact that the French bourgeoisie, or at least large sections of it, remained committed to the democratic republic and some even joined the socialist movement [83; 86].

After the 1870s the class divide was much clearer in Germany, where increasing numbers of former middle-class liberals reneged on democratic reform and gave their support to the semi-authoritarian institutions of the Second Reich. Not least important in this development was a growing neurosis about the 'red peril', which acted as a kind of cement to bring landowning and bourgeois groups together in reactionary alliance, even though the 'feudalisation of the bourgeoisie' in Germany was far less clear cut than often imagined. German employers also adopted authoritarian practices in their factories, organising black lists of agitators, dismissing trade union and social democratic activists, and refusing to recognise or deal with trade unions [104]. In a sense, therefore, German workers were forced into independent, class-based politics, a process facilitated by the early introduction of universal male suffrage (in 1867 in the North German Confederation and 1871 in the new Reich) at a time when the liberal parties scarcely existed in any organisational sense. What then followed was a kind of vicious circle: the more independent and radical that working-class politics became, the more neurotic and reactionary became the politics of the bourgeoisie and vice versa. A similar dynamic may have developed in Spain, where a 'reactionary coalition' evolved between 'a powerful political oligarchy, made up of the monarchy, landowners and the Church, and a politically weak commercial and manufacturing bourgeoisie' [210]. In Russia it was the absence of a strong bourgeoisie as a result of dependence on foreign capital and the dominant industrial role of the state which, for Trotsky, provided the key to revolutionary potential [192].

Important as the political behaviour of the bourgeoisie or other groups was for the determination of working-class political identity, of related but even more crucial significance was the nature and role of the *state*. At the one extreme an authoritarian and repressive regime, one which offered no

legal channels for the articulation of workers' grievances, was likely to produce a revolutionary labour movement, as was most obviously the case in Tsarist Russia, which brought upon itself the revolutions of 1905 and 1917. Labour radicalism was also engendered in Spain by the brutality of the Civil Guard and the corrupt electoral system, which maintained power in the hands of local notables, while the regular deployment of troops against strikers and demonstrators in Italy and the fact that electoral reform came late in the day (1912) fuelled the position of the 'maximalists' within the PSI [150; 166; 210]. Conversely the relatively liberal institutions of Edwardian Britain, the tolerance of labour organisation, indeed even its encouragement by some agencies of the state (Board of Trade, Home Office), and the existence of parliamentary sovereignty led those workers with the vote to conceive of change within the prevailing system [42; 63].

Imperial Germany lay somewhere between Russia and Britain in terms of its political system. Parliament was not sovereign; thus the SPD could not come to power through the ballot box. At a regional level many states possessed discriminatory franchises based on income, while electoral boundaries favoured the rural voter. Social Democrats were barred from public office, and a host of laws made trade union action and political agitation for the left difficult. Under such circumstances it was scarcely accidental that the SPD adopted a Marxist programme. However, the divisions within that party were also a function of the fact that Germany's Second Reich was no unlimited autocracy. There were civil liberties, albeit often infringed. There was universal male suffrage to the Reichstag. The SPD could compete for votes (though not power) in elections. The trade unions were allowed to survive, however much they continued to be harassed. Thus German Social Democracy's inability to be one thing or the other, unmitigatedly revolutionary or unambiguously reformist, was a consequence of this peculiar political situation [118; 120; 125; 138; 140].

If anything the French scene was even more complex. Time and again the French state had turned on its working class with violence before the formation of the Third Republic in 1871. Even after the turn of the century elected governments

of Radical hue often used troops to beat the strikes of miners, railway workers and postal staff. Mass dismissal of strikers from government employment was not uncommon and sometimes they were drafted into the army. Yet this was only one side of the French state: the side that explains labour militancy. The Third Republic was a democratic polity. Unlike the German case, it was an *elected* government that reacted to strikes in the way described above. At a local level government was porous to socialist influence, as in the *bourses du travail*, local labour exchanges which in fact formed the focus for trade union growth. Thus the heterogeneity of the French labour movement reflected the complexity of French political life [75; 83; 86].

## **The social basis of labour politics**

It is a commonplace of labour history today that the labour movements of Britain, France and Germany had their origin in the activities of artisans and skilled workers [7; 66; 68; 77; 86]. The issue has been hotly debated in the Italian case but the balance of opinion would again seem to fall on the side of those who see early Italian socialism as based upon artisan culture, in the case of Biella woollen-weavers in a rural context, rather than as the work of all advanced 'factory proletariat'. It was skilled printers, textile workers and subsequently metalworkers who established the PSI, which did then shortly before the war become increasingly attractive to workers in the rapidly expanding engineering and automobile industries of the Milan-Turin-Genoa triangle [144; 145; 150]. Obviously the subsequent growth of all these parties did imply in the long term increasing support from ever broader sections of the working class: the sheer scale of the SPD's vote in Germany in 1912, for example, implies success in mobilising more than simply skilled workers. And yet the *membership* of most socialist and labour parties in Europe before 1914 remained dominated by skilled men. The British Labour Party was above all a party of trade unionists, which normally meant skilled males [63]. The SFIO in France had its bastions amongst the skilled workers in the building, wood, leather and

metal trades, though from the 1880s some support had been forthcoming from textile factory workers in the north of the country [86]. A survey of the local branches of German social democracy reveals a similar picture: in Hamburg printers, wood and skilled building workers predominated, as did metalworkers, printers and woodworkers in Baden. In the very large Leipzig organisation of 1904 were mobilised 138 lower-middle-class members, 200 unskilled workers but over 1,300 plumbers, painters, masons, printers, bookbinders and other skilled men [118]. In Spain the socialist party was based upon the printing trades of Madrid; it was only shortly before 1914 that headroads were made in recruiting iron and steelworkers from the northern Basque provinces and the miners of the Asturias [210]. Here, however, the more successful anarchist movement won support from rural labourers in Andalusia and textile workers in Catalonia.

This last point brings us back to the question of the diversity of labour politics. Many good historians have attempted to link different forms of working-class politics to different occupational or skill groupings within the working class. Thus it seems at first sight reasonable to see the reformism of British labour as a result of the relatively secure and well-placed position of skilled 'labour aristocrats'. The fact that Guesde's Marxists recruited from factory labour while syndicalism was more deeply rooted amongst the Paris artisanate also suggests such a correlation. In Spain the attraction of anarchism has been explained by the volatility of rural labour there on the one hand and the small-scale nature of Catalan textile production on the other.

Unfortunately such an approach has innumerable pitfalls. 'Labour aristocrats' in France, Germany and Italy were often far from reformist. In France syndicalism not only was the preserve of the craftsman but also attracted unskilled porcelain workers and bakers' assistants. Equally reformism characterised the northern French coalfields but not those of the Midi [83]. In Spain rural anarchism was not simply the preserve of unskilled labour on the large estates but was given support by some small producers and skilled workers, as in the Cadiz area. The small-scale nature of production in the Catalan textile industry may have had something to do with a



proclivity to syndicalism rather than socialism; but small-scale production in the Basque province of Guipúzcoa did not have a like result [210].

To return to the main point, most European labour and socialist parties on the eve of the First World War found their organisations dominated by skilled urban workers. In two cases at least, however, and here in marked contrast to Britain and Germany, the labour movement also made a successful appeal to sections of the agricultural community. This happened in Italy and in France. The advent of intensive capitalist farming in the Po valley led to a wave of immigration of landless labourers in the 1880s and 1890s with few roots in local rural society and subjected to large seasonal shifts in the demand for labour. To try and regulate the labour supply these labourers began to form co-operatives, which collectively tendered for work and many of which identified with the growing socialist movement. These contacts were facilitated by the proximity of the area of capitalist farming to the urban north, bastion of the new movement, and the contacts born of local migration [150].

In France the situation was somewhat different. Some rural support did come from wage-labourers, in particular from the woodcutters of the Cher and Nièvre; most interestingly a great deal also came from peasant *landowners* and sharecroppers, groups who, in the German case for example, could be mobilised against the left elsewhere. By 1914 eight of the twelve regions in which the SFIO's share of the vote topped 20 per cent were semi-rural regions in the centre and south of France. This phenomenon cannot be reduced to 'traditional radicalism', for the areas of socialist penetration were not identical with those that had seen radical peasant action in the past [80]. Religion may have played a part: one area of radical peasant politics, the Cévennes, had opposed central Catholicism with its Protestantism since the days of the Albigensian crusades. Yet not all the areas of socialist support overlapped with this small enclave. Anti-clericalism, on the other hand, may have played some role: the Var and the Hérault were bastions of hostility to the Church in a country in which a strong correlation existed between low religious observance and the politics of the left. In addition, and unlike the more

conservative peasants of north-western France, the peasants of Languedoc and Provence lived not in isolated hamlets but in urban settings in which they came into frequent contact with local artisans and that agent of secularisation, the village schoolteacher. They also lived in a Mediterranean culture in which local notables had never been so powerful as elsewhere and had their own traditions of assembly [80; 82].

However, these explanations are secondary to the crucial point, which explains both the timing and the location of peasant socialism, namely that peasant support for the SFIO came from those engaged in the production of cash crops and in particular the production of wine. The small wine-producers of Provence, increasingly dependent on the grape for their livelihood after the destruction of cork, olive and shoe production, were confronted at best by fluctuations in the value of their product and at times by price collapse. To them the socialists offered the regulation of the wine market by the state and the collectivisation of the large estates, held responsible for the production of the surplus. To sharecroppers, faced by shorter leases and the same price fluctuations, the SFIO promised cheap credit, easier leases and market regulation [74; 80; 83].

The relationship between labour politics and rural society is one that obviously becomes crucial in the case of Russia, where the sheer newness of the industrial labour force meant that a high percentage of factory labour was recruited from the huge countryside. The influx of peasants into the factories of St Petersburg and Moscow in the years immediately before the war used to be seen as a major source of worker radicalism and Bolshevik recruitment [188]; more recent work has emphasised the importance of the collectivist values of the Russian village commune for the mentality of Russian factory labour [192]. While not wishing to deny this, however, several other studies of labour radicalism in the major urban centres of Tsarist Russia have produced a picture more in accordance with what has been discovered elsewhere: the militants were not newly arrived peasants but more settled and skilled metalworkers [189; 197]. In any case, and as was argued earlier, the extent of repression in Russia was likely to generate general working-class upheaval in times of revolution.

What is quite clear is that by no means all industrial workers, even in the most industrialised nations such as Britain and Germany, were prepared or able to participate in the growing political institutions of the labour movement. Why was this?

## **Deterrents to political organisation**

As stated repeatedly already, it was skilled men who formed the backbone of working-class political parties on the eve of the First World War. The failure of unskilled workers to organise should not be understood as their being happy with their lot. They certainly had grievances: on many occasions they resorted to strike action to rectify them. Furthermore many of those who had remained unorganised before 1914 participated with elemental force in the revolutionary upheavals at the end of the First World War, suggesting that their previous quiescence had more to do with the difficulties in taking action at an earlier point in time. This is the crucial point: workers almost invariably had grievances, but only in certain situations or at certain points in time were they able to organise to defend themselves. In some cases this was a consequence of governmental legislation. In Prussia before 1908 membership of a political party was barred to women; in the same state laws of association made the organisation of domestic servants and rural labourers an illegal act, while membership of the Social Democratic Party was forbidden to all public servants, including railway workers. In other cases and more generally skilled men possessed certain assets which enabled them to organise; women and unskilled men were not so lucky.

At a most basic level skilled workers could organise because they earned more and worked fewer hours than their less skilled colleagues. They had the time, the energy and the money to attend party meetings and pay party dues. They also had traditions of organisation going back to the pre-industrial period, a sense of their own worth as human beings, instilled together with occupational skills during apprenticeship. Thus they harboured certain expectations as to how they

should be treated both by employers and by the state, and were much more likely to react to threats to their position than unskilled workers, without traditions of organisation and with relatively low expectations, especially where they (the unskilled) came, as many did, from rural backgrounds. Unskilled workers also lacked the crucial asset which gave the craftsmen strength in the labour market, namely the skill born of apprenticeship. Thus they were more easily replaced for industrial or political 'disobedience' than the skilled sections of the labour force. This inability to organise collectively over time was reinforced in those areas which recruited distant migrants and expanded very rapidly, such as the Ruhr: patterns of communication had to be established between the newcomers before a collective consciousness could arise. It was no accident that the heartland of organised social democracy in Germany was to be found in the older industrial cities such as Hamburg and Leipzig rather than the 'wild west' of the Ruhr, where high levels of labour turnover also militated against permanent labour organisation [7; 120]. A similar pattern appears to have applied in France [77].

If some workers began their existence in a position of insecurity and weakness *vis-à-vis* employers and the state authorities, there were additionally a variety of strategies that employers could adopt to control or contain labour organisation. Admittedly these strategies were more often aimed at attracting and keeping a stable labour force and preventing *industrial* unrest, but the same mechanisms could also be exploited to keep workers out of socialist organisations, as was the case of BASF in Ludwigshafen and Krupp in Essen. To tie labour to the firm and exact both industrial and political loyalty, employers in French heavy industry established networks of informers, black lists and their own labour exchanges. Pension schemes and company housing were offered to attract labour but were instantly forfeited should the worker engage in protest. In Germany the giant firms of heavy industry built company housing on a massive scale, offered a variety of company welfare schemes and in various ways sought to exact obedience [83; 87; 90; 91; 118]. Thus further barriers to the independent organisation of labour were erected.

The problem of organisation was especially acute in the



case of women. In 1914 the Labour Party was a party of unionised men; the French SFIO's membership consisted of only 3 per cent female recruits. In Germany there was a significant women's section of the SPD numbering little short of 200,000 members, but this still meant a gross under-representation of women in the party. Furthermore the female party members tended not to be in wage-employment outside the home but were rather the wives of skilled men who were already active in party politics. The same was true in France of those women who joined the SFIO [63; 83; 120; 134]. Women could and did initiate some quite major industrial actions in the match-making and textile industries of Britain, France and Germany; as the worst remunerated of all sections of the working class, women clearly had multiple grievances, yet, as already stated, they by and large remained excluded from the ranks of organised workers. This can be explained at least in part by the factors already enumerated in the case of unskilled workers. Female labour was in fact the archetype of unskilled labour, with the lowest rates of pay and often the longest working hours. Women were concentrated in sectors infamous for poor working conditions: agriculture, domestic service, the sweated garment trades, cottage textile industry, unskilled labour in textile and food-processing plants. In such positions unskilled men did not organise, and women also lacked the time, the energy, the money and the bargaining power in the labour market.

The woman's lot was complicated by additional factors, however. First, there was the double burden: the end of work in the factory often meant the start of chores in the home. Second, it is of some significance that the majority of women in factory employment were single and relatively young. Married and older women in such employment tended to be either widows or wives of low-paid male workers. This leads to a simple conclusion: work outside the home, at least in the form of manual employment, held little attraction for women. They did it because they had to, expected relatively little from it and regarded it in many cases as a temporary situation prior to marriage. Additionally the closeness of many if not most women in France, Germany, Holland, Belgium, Italy and Spain to the Church and its values may well have served to

keep them away from socialist organisations that were usually anti-clerical if not explicitly atheistic in conviction and which were denounced by innumerable priests as 'godless'. It is equally probable that the unofficial but none the less rampant sexism of male trade unionists and party members was off-putting to many women: the world of organised as well as unorganised labour was still the macho world of masculinity, of beer, bar and pub. The fact that women were not enfranchised virtually anywhere in Europe before the First World War may have also led male politicians to lose interest in their recruitment, especially as electoral success became the overriding consideration of many socialist parties in this period; while the primary concerns of many of the women who did become involved in politics – legal protection, property rights in marriage, educational opportunity and the franchise – did not always correspond to the main goals of male-dominated labour organisations [78; 83; 94; 118; 134].

Other factors affecting the proclivity of workers to form political organisations or not may be found in the realms of residence and popular culture. Most obviously and as pointed out above the occupancy of company housing militated against radical behaviour, the result of which might be instantaneous eviction. The residential solidarity of miners in the rapidly expanding Ruhr town of Bochum helped to reinforce an occupational consciousness that was missing on the part of metalworkers in the same town [104]. In France Carmaux glassworkers first entered the ranks of labour politics when they came to live side by side with the already militant local miners [92]. Thus the varying degrees of political commitment amongst the same occupational group may be explicable in terms of those groups with whom they share their living space. Involvement in politics can conversely be limited where better-off workers were able to enjoy a 'modest domesticity' [60], as in Britain. In Germany on the other hand massive urban overcrowding as a result of natural population growth and large-scale migration from the rural east to the industrial west deprived most German workers of the possibility of a home-centred and privatised culture, which in turn may explain why the leisure and educational organisations of German social democracy proved so popular.

That popularity also owed something to another difference between Germany and Britain. Only in Britain had mass commercialised leisure developed on a really significant scale before 1914. On the European continent the recreational activities of organised labour had to compete with this – in all but a few metropolitan centres – only after the First World War [117].

## **Divisions in labour politics**

Mention has already been made of ideological divisions within most of the continental parties of labour before 1914, of differences between the behaviour of the skilled and unskilled, and between men and women. These were not the only divisions which made the organisation of unitary labour or socialist parties difficult. *Within* the working class there was political competition. One line of fissure was that of religion. In Belgium Catholics formed their own unions, as was also the case in Germany. In fact in that latter country most Catholic industrial workers continued to vote for the Catholic Centre Party before the First World War, while the bastions of the SPD were to be found in the large industrial towns of Protestant Germany such as Hamburg, Berlin, Leipzig and Dresden. In France Catholicism still influenced workers in some towns in the Midi and in Flanders; areas of high religious observance were also places where socialism remained weak. Shortly before the war in Italy the PSI had to compete with a new mass-party, the Catholic *Popolari* [83; 117; 150]. Equally divisive was the issue of race. French workers in the north of the country resented the employment of deeply Catholic Belgians, while Marseilles dockers supported colonial ventures. In Austria-Hungary Germans and Czechs organised separate socialist parties. In Britain Irish immigration often provoked a conservative backlash amongst English workers in Lancashire; in Germany the large Polish minority, who may have constituted as much as one-third of the total labour force in the mines of the Ruhr, formed their own union and supported Polish nationalism [63; 83; 118]. This is not meant to say that such divisions invariably cut

across class loyalties. Polish miners joined their German and socialist colleagues in the strikes of 1905 and 1912; the Christian Unions also joined in 1905. Thus particular circumstances could bridge divisions. Furthermore some of the ethnic tensions were less to do with race as such than what might be described as instrumental issues: Belgians or Poles or the Irish were resented as potential causes of wage-reduction and redundancy. None the less on the eve of the First World War the independent parties of labour had a long way to go to recruit anything resembling a majority of the working class.



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### 3 War and Revolution, Hopes and Illusions

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#### **The onset of war**

Most of the political parties described in the previous chapter had belonged to the International Working Men's Association, or Second International, founded in Paris in 1889. The mere fact of membership indicated a significant fact about the ideologies of all those parties: they saw themselves as internationalist. The homeland was the proletariat. The enemy was international capital. Workers could have no interest in warfare but were to be the bastion of peace and international harmony in a new social order. Admittedly things were never quite so simple. The congresses of the International were often characterised by sniping between national delegations, especially the French and the Germans. No agreement was ever reached on the precise nature of imperialism or how to combat it. Most importantly of all, the delegates were never able to formulate a concrete strategy to prevent the outbreak of war: some looked to the possibility of a revolutionary general strike, others, especially the Germans, thought such schemes utopian and dangerous. Yet the International did seem to stand for something, did suggest that workers would not necessarily follow national political leaders blindly into another war [2; 10; 16].

The events of August 1914 shattered this dream and led radical critics such as Lenin to speak of the betrayal of the socialist movement by its leaders. For in early August 1914 only the Russian and Serbian Social Democratic Parties voted not to support their governments' war efforts and to oppose the idea of national self-defence. In several countries, as in Britain, the parties of labour were divided on the issue from

the outset. In others, as in France and Germany in particular, socialists voted to support the war credits and the national war effort.

This decision of August 1914 has often been seen as the triumph of working-class reformism, as the defeat of internationalism by nationalism, of class warfare by class collaboration. It is obviously true that a strong sense of national loyalty did capture the masses in those summer days of 1914. The reality, however, is somewhat more complex. The fact that Welsh miners who had been militant in the years 1911–14 also volunteered to fight for their country soon thereafter perhaps suggests not that workers had to choose between class and national loyalty but shared a dual identity, as does the fact that they struck again in 1915. Their nationalism was scarcely that of the chauvinist right: they were in fact fighting for a different kind of country. The same applies even to the right wing of German social democracy, which had always intended to support the government's war effort but did so partly in the belief that the ruling elite would be obliged to offer constitutional change in return. So nationalism here was still linked to criticism of the prevailing political order. In fact the SPD's support for the war was explicitly conditional upon that war being defensive, the position adopted by most socialist parties. When it became clear that this was not the case opposition to the war grew apace and led in 1917 to the formation of a new party, the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD). The supposed popular enthusiasm for the war amongst German workers has also been called into question by recent research on Brunswick and Hamburg. Even if working-class nationalism had called the tune at the outbreak of war, things looked very different two years later, with food riots, strikes and the growth of political opposition.

## **The impact of war**

The war is obviously best remembered for the huge human sacrifice it entailed and also for the material deprivations which formed the background to revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe at its end. Yet labour's experience during the

conflict and in particular the role accorded leading trade unionists and party politicians was not unmitigatedly disastrous. The advanced industrial nations realised that the maintenance of the economic war effort required the active co-operation of organised labour to guarantee a steady supply of munitions to the front and were therefore forced to grant some degree of recognition to labour leaders. This was done most successfully and significantly in the democratic polities of France and Britain; while the continued exclusion of labour from the processes of political decision-making in the autocracies of Central and Eastern Europe proved to be a recipe for revolution. In France the left's support of the government led the latter to abandon plans to arrest leading socialists upon the outbreak of war. Rather some were taken into the national coalition of the *union sacrée*. Across the Channel Arthur Henderson was recruited into government and in Lloyd George's coalition participated in the inner War Cabinet of only five ministers at the same time as other Labour MPs enjoyed ministerial office. Such recognition may have helped play a part in Labour's huge electoral gains at the end of the war, also fuelled by Lloyd George's splitting of the Liberal Party and above all by the large increase in the number of enfranchised workers as a result of electoral reform in 1918 [6; 98]. At the same time state intervention in the economy to guide the war effort brought to the attention of the public the possibility of controlling private capital and the labour market, of pegging rents and protecting the weaker sections of society against the depredations of market forces. It was no accident that the Labour Party adopted a new constitution in 1918 which, amongst other things, committed the membership to the socialisation of the means of production (Clause IV).

Germany's semi-authoritarian Second Reich was not prepared to concede ministerial posts to Social Democrats until the very end of the conflict (October 1918); in fact decision-making fell increasingly into the hands of the High Command of the Reichswehr. However, many leading generals, especially Wilhelm Groener, realised that the war could be fought to a glorious conclusion only with the help of organised labour. As a result outstanding trials of trade union officials were called

off and those officials were exempted from military service. The Free Trade Unions and the Social Democrats were now allowed to recruit from rural labourers and state employees; their literature was no longer barred from military barracks. Above all the Auxiliary Service Law of 1916 established in all plants of over fifty employees 'workers' committees', which effectively obliged previously recalcitrant employees to deal with and recognise trade unions. In return the unions promised to abandon industrial action for the duration of the war in the so-called 'civil truce', while some leading Social Democrats were far less critical of the German government's prosecution of the war (especially the treatment of Belgian prisoners-of-war) than they might otherwise have been. Between 1914 and 1918 the German state also extended various forms of welfare provision, and in particular began to develop an embryonic system of unemployment benefits and labour legislation [107; 124].

The results of such developments were paradoxical. On the one hand the enforced recognition of trade unions was one factor which led to a quite massive influx into those organisations in Britain, France and Germany at the end of the First World War. It now made sense to join them. On the other collusion between trade union leaders and labour politicians with the establishment of systems of national wage bargaining gave rise to a shop-floor working-class militancy led by shop stewards, often distant from and hostile to the official leadership. Engineering workers on the Clyde struck for two weeks in February 1915 in defiance of central union instructions; there subsequently developed within the British engineering industry the movement of shop stewards demanding an end to the 'dilution' of labour and, in certain limited cases, some degree of workers' control. Also in 1915 200,000 South Wales coalminers engaged in unofficial action. The year 1917 in France was marked by a great deal of unrest in the factories, while both Germany and Austria witnessed large-scale strikes of munitions workers on several occasions between 1916 and 1918, culminating in giant strikes in Vienna and Berlin in January 1918. Significantly the Berlin strike was organised not by the official union leadership but by a group calling themselves the 'Revolutionary Shop Stewards', based on the



turners' branch of the Berlin section of the German Metalworkers' Union (DMV) [15; 19; 20; 31; 33; 54; 98; 102; 112].

The origins of the divide which began to separate the rank-and-file of many European labour movements from their ostensible leaders is not that difficult to explain, of course. For the war brought a host of material deprivations to fuel discontent. Though the situation was very different in Britain and France, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe experienced food-price inflation, food shortages and on occasion starvation. Such shortages also gave rise to malnutrition and weakness in the face of disease, in particular the influenza epidemic that struck Europe at the end of the war. Inflation in these countries eroded the increases in money wages even of skilled munitions workers, the 'labour aristocracy' of the war years. Real wages and living standards fell: in some cases they plummeted. French workers suffered less than their counterparts across the Rhine, but they too had to cope with high levels of inflation between 1914 and 1920. In Italy rampant price inflation also accompanied the seizure of factories by workers in Milan and Turin in 1920. In Russia between the February and October Revolutions of 1917 the supply of food and fuel broke down almost completely. Inflation and shortages not only gave rise to food riots, not uncommon in Germany from 1915, but also led the public to question the legitimacy of governments which could not fulfil their most essential function, that of keeping their citizens alive. Shortage in turn produced another phenomenon which created anger and class resentment: the growth of the black market and war profiteering [7; 107; 184]. On top of all this the war saw longer working hours at an increased pace of work with most protective labour legislation suspended. One result was a significant increase in the number of industrial accidents.

Tensions between trade union and party leaders on the one hand and their rank-and-file on the other were not new to the war and their origin lay partly in a series of structural changes in industrial production which had begun before 1914 but were greatly accelerated during the great conflict. Amongst these was a general increase in the pace of work (intensification of labour), that led some engineering workers



to complain of suffering from nervous exhaustion. Such increased pressure even took place in trades which experienced no great technological revolution: bricklayers were expected to lay more bricks per hour in 1914 than two decades previously, for example. In other cases increased pressure came from a more efficient exploitation of the division of labour ('Taylorism or 'scientific management'), which involved bonus systems of reward for higher productivity and increased supervision on the shop-floor. Sometimes these developments were also related to technical advances: the increased use of mechanical saws, prefabricated wooden units, iron and concrete in the building industry, the employment of gas and electric motors for lifting and haulage, the introduction of mechanical drills, more specialised lathes and milling and grinding machines in engineering, the mechanisation of shoe manufacture in the 1890s and the development of glass-bottling plants somewhat earlier. In a few cases the modernisation of production techniques took the most full-blooded form, namely a single power source to direct the pace of production through the conveyor belt, as pioneered by Henry Ford in the USA and so savagely satirised in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* somewhat later. Such extreme examples of technological modernisation, however, appeared only rarely, as in French automobile production, the Bosch engineering plants in Stuttgart, and parts of the chemical, electro-technical and food-processing industries everywhere.

The intensification of labour as a result of the innovations described above had a number of consequences. In the first place it explains why significant increases in living standards which were experienced by European labour in the period between 1850 and at least 1900 – thereafter price inflation tended to lead to a slow-down in real wage rises in France and Germany and possibly even decline in Britain – did not necessarily lead to a fall in strike-action or industrial militancy. On the contrary: the years 1909 to 1913 witnessed strike waves in several European countries, with workers intent on preserving wage levels against inflationary pressures and resisting new systems of work and its supervision. French printers and engineers downed tools against Taylorism and Bosch's workers in Stuttgart did the same in 1913. Significantly

the strikes of this period immediately before the First World War spread to less skilled groups, who often joined trade unions for the first time. This too was partly a result of the new methods of production, which enabled the employment of women and youths on a hitherto unprecedented scale in semi-skilled occupations. Younger workers seem to have been especially impatient with the caution of trade union leaders, while skilled men feared either a real or supposed threat of deskilling.

This said, however, it would be wrong to assume that *political* radicalism (as distinct from industrial militancy) was a necessary consequence of such economic developments. First, in the British case, for example, reformism remained the hallmark of the labour movement. Second, it would be wrong to exaggerate the extent of technological modernisation before 1914. Even in the German case, far less so in Britain, new US techniques of serial production were the exception rather than the rule. Third, it was not a generation of former skilled men who did the less skilled jobs but rather new recruits to the industrial labour force, often from rural backgrounds. In general the massive expansion of engineering created more opportunities for skilled workers rather than fewer. In any case new machines could still remain the preserve of skilled labour, as in the case of printers and engineers in Britain, where manning agreements were negotiated between management and strong unions. This is not to say that generational conflict within the European labour movement was not relevant to subsequent and radical developments on the political front; engineering workers were often associated with radical politics, as in the case of the Fédération des Métaux in France and the German Metalworkers' Union (DMV) across the Rhine. None the less, the point remains that there was no *automatic* connection between the rationalisation of industry and left-wing politics [7; 13; 24; 48; 77; 83; 92; 93].

The war years witnessed an increase in the rate of technological modernisation, especially in the war industries, and a more rapid restructuring of the workforce. Increasing numbers of young and female workers came to work in the rapidly expanding plants of heavy industry and armaments production when older workers were called to fight at the front. In

1913 the number of 14–16 year olds in the German metal industry had stood at under 11,000 but rose to 18,000 in the next four years. Such youths came to work in the large engineering and electro-technical concerns in Berlin, in the Leuna chemical works and in the pits and foundries of Krupp and Thyssen in the Ruhr. These newer factories often employed serial or flow techniques of production and were manned not only by younger workers but also by *semi-skilled* workers. Unlike the skilled workers, they served no apprenticeship but were trained for limited tasks on the shop-floor. On the other hand these new workers were not as quiescent as the traditionally unskilled workers; there does seem to have been a correlation between new workers in large factories or pits and political radicalism at the end of the First World War [1; 7; 13; 19; 149]. The massive influx of such workers into European trade unions caused a host of problems for the older, craft-trained union leaders. As Gerald Feldman writes

The trade unions were poorly structured both in personnel and in organizational character to assimilate the influx of new members that began everywhere in 1917 and reached massive proportions at the end of the war. There was a serious shortage of functionaries, and a long history of craft traditions and craft organization not easily adapted to the mass factory and to the new impulses in the direction of the industrial rather than the craft union. [1: 161]

Such developments were not peculiar to Germany. There is evidence from both France and England in 1917 that official union leaders had lost touch with their membership. The huge increase in wartime demand in Italy led in the north of the country to an unprecedented expansion of the engineering industries of Milan, Turin and Genoa, which formed the backcloth to a rapid increase in trade union membership. It also spurred certain radical developments: the focus of industrial militancy now shifted from the small towns and craft workers to both the skilled and semi-skilled of the giant factories of Milan and Turin, where in 1920 workers took over their factories, sometimes without and on occasion against official union directives [158]. Again it was no accident that

the centre of revolutionary activity in Russia was to be found in the metalworkers of the giant Putilov armaments factory in St Petersburg [190; 197].

If material deprivation and changes in the composition of the labour force were factors helping to radicalise the European working class between 1914 and 1918, there were other aspects of the war that tended in the same direction. It became noticeable that strikes in Russia, Austria and Germany, although primarily concerned with questions of rations and working conditions, began to take on political overtones: demands for the release of political prisoners, the relaxation of martial law, democratic reform and above all peace. In a sense the circumstances of war led the subjects of autocratic states to ask why they should sacrifice themselves for a political system which excluded them from full citizenship rights. Second, and of the utmost importance, is the fact that the deprivations endured disproportionately by workers in the war years were clearly the result of a political decision, namely the decision to wage war. To end deprivation, therefore, the governments of Central and Eastern Europe were called upon to bring the war to an end. Failure to do so led directly to the overthrow of Tsarism in February and of the Kerensky regime in October 1917 in Russia, and to the collapse of the semi-authoritarian regimes of Austria and Germany roughly a year later, because the old structures were held responsible for both war and defeat.

So far I have tried to outline some of the ways in which the First World War radicalised sections of the European labour movement and prepared the way for the revolutionary upheavals at its end. It is important to realise, however, that these upheavals were not simply the product of war but at least in certain cases the consequence of the long-term aspirations of some groups of workers. The years immediately before 1914 had seen a resurgence of industrial militancy in Britain, France, Germany and Italy, some of it with the kind of syndicalist undertones that characterised the mass movements of 1917–21. Opposition to the official caution of the German Metalworkers' Union was marked from 1905; in the areas of that opposition was to be found the origins of the revolutionary shop stewards' movement. Similar develop-



ments took place in the Ruhr coalfield in 1912, amongst Welsh miners, Liverpool dockers and British railway workers between 1911 and 1914. In June 1914 Italy experienced its 'red week', with clashes between workers and troops in several parts of the country; in Russia Bolshevik strength was on the increase between 1911 and the onset of war [7; 20; 158; 178].

The tragic division of European labour into social democratic and communist camps was another phenomenon occasioned by the war but not entirely of its making. Socialists had to adopt a stance on the war. Radicals such as Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin argued that the war was an imperialist war, a fight between capitalists in which the proletariat had no interest. All states were equally culpable and thus the concept of a justifiable war of defence had become an irrelevance. Others, such as Karl Kautsky, believed not in 'revolutionary defeatism' (exploit the war to bring about revolution) but in a policy of 'peace without annexations', a return to the *status quo ante-bellum*. Yet others were prepared to support their government's war effort, come what may. These divisions were compounded in the wake of the Russian October Revolution, after which Lenin and the Bolsheviks established the Third International to rival the Second. Led from Moscow, its twenty-one conditions of affiliation demanded the expulsion of all non-revolutionary elements from socialist parties and tighter central control, both nationally and internationally. It was on the issue of whether or not to affiliate to this organisation that the SFIO in France and the PSI in Italy split into competing and often hostile camps. The combination of war and the triumph of the Bolsheviks in the Russian Revolution of October 1917 thus played a major role in causing a fundamental split in the European labour movement that was subsequently to prove so fateful. Yet many of the political divisions that rent national labour movements asunder after 1917 had been prefigured in the period before 1914.

As we have already seen, the French Socialist Party (SFIO) from its inception in 1905 had never been monolithic, containing Guesdiste, Jaurèsian, Blanquist and Possibilist groups, not to mention the syndicalist groups in the CGT. This complexity was reflected more than a little at the Congress of Tours in 1920, when two-thirds of those present voted to



affiliate to the Third (Leninist) International and form the French Communist Party (PCF). The reasons why the various groupings decided to join the PCF or stay in the rump SFIO, which none the less quickly re-established itself as the larger of the labour parties in France, were many, various and often confused. It is not possible to attempt to describe them here. However, it remains the case, with certain qualifications, that the French Communist Party recruited from syndicalist and socialist party branches that had been radical before the First World War, whereas the SFIO found its strength from those who had earlier subscribed to some form of reformist labour politics [97; 98]. If anything the history of the Italian Socialist Party in the period immediately before 1914 (though not only then) had been characterised by even more uncertainty. It is certainly the case that the crisis engendered by Italy's Libyan War of 1911–12 exposed the fissures between reformists (change within the prevailing system), maximalists (change through revolutionary *political action*) and syndicalists (revolutionary change, but through industrial rather than political action, in particular through the general strike). To a significant extent subsequent divisions between the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the country's Socialist Party (PSI) were built upon these earlier disagreements about strategy, though even after 1919 neither party was uniform in its views as to the best way to change society in labour's interests [20; 146; 150; 158; 160].

If anything it is even clearer that the creation of a communist movement in Germany after the First World War was not the result of the pressure of exogeneous forces. First, the foundation of the German Communist Party took place in December 1918 *before* Lenin established the Third (Communist) International and laid down the twenty-one conditions of affiliation to it. Second, as pointed out above, German social democracy was no more monolithic in its ideas about strategy than was the PSI or the SFIO. And once again one can trace radical continuities which stretch from the period before 1914 to the revolutionary upheavals between 1918 and 1923. It may have been the case that leading trade unionists, prominent social democrats in the more liberal states of south Germany (especially Baden) and revisionist intellectuals wished to

abandon the party's official Marxist ideology and enter into collaboration with liberal groups in reforming the political and social system of Imperial Germany. How representative they were of the SPD's rank-and-file, however, is open to question. There existed social democratic party branches which denounced revisionism and reformism, which stressed the proletarian *class* base of revolutionary politics and which could demonstrate a continuity in radical attitudes from the Wilhelmine to the Weimar period. Such was the case in Remscheid and Solingen (towns to the east of Cologne and south of the Ruhr which were the centres of skilled cutlery manufacture), in Brunswick (another bastion of radical metal-workers) and the port of Bremen. In such towns a large percentage of the party's membership turned to the anti-war Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD) between 1914 and 1918, and subsequently found itself in the ranks of the communists [8; 20; 103; 112; 123; 128; 138].

Thus the emergence of communist movements in countries other than Russia in the inter-war period was not simply the result of the international machinations of the Bolshevik party, though these did help to exacerbate divisions that already existed within the various national labour movements. It is also obviously the case that the success – or at least apparent success – of Lenin in engineering a 'workers' revolution' in Russia when revolutionary insurrections met with disastrous failure elsewhere in Europe increased the attraction of the Russian 'model' and the prestige of the Bolsheviks. Yet the division of European working-class parties during and after the First World War was built upon the pre-war splits already described. The absence of a genuinely revolutionary labour movement in Britain *before* 1914 thus forms a crucial explanation of the failure of Communism to take root in that particular country. On the other hand in continental – and especially Eastern and Central – Europe before the First World War, the fact that socialist parties confronted repressive governments and were socially isolated in what was to all intents and purposes a non-revolutionary situation served to keep reformists and revolutionaries under the same political banner and in the same organisation, as the French, Italian and above all German cases testify. The

absence of real revolutionary possibilities in such countries before 1914 meant that difference in ultimate goal, sometimes even immediate strategy, could not effectively be put to the test. However, the overthrow of the *ancien régime* in many states at the end of the First World War, the collapse or at least temporary immobility of the forces of reaction and repression, and the massive disillusion with governments that had promised victory but brought only death, deprivation and defeat, now brought the question of 'reform or revolution' on to the immediate agenda. Previously submerged or only half-articulated differences between the political representatives of European labour now opened into unbridgeable chasms.

## **Hopes of revolution and reform**

In February 1917 the Tsarist autocracy had been overthrown by a combination of forces: revolutionary workers, land-hungry peasants, army deserters, middle-class liberals and intellectuals. Outside the ranks of the old elite, which in any case was hopelessly divided within itself, there was almost universal rejoicing. In place of the old regime a Provisional Government was established committed to constitutional reform along democratic lines and either the conclusion of peace or a more efficient and successful prosecution of the war. From its very inception, however, the authority of the new Provisional Government was challenged in the country's urban centres by the existence of workers' councils (soviets), especially in Moscow and St Petersburg (now Petrograd). These grass-roots organisations of the industrial working class had been the real basis of the February Revolution and they fell increasingly under the control of left-wing political groups (anarchists, Bolsheviks) which desired far more than democratic reform, placing their faith in some form of social revolution. The government's failure to bring the war to a successful conclusion further eroded its popularity and brought about increasingly desperate material conditions for the Russian people. Shortages of food, fuel and housing in turn fed the growing radicalism of the urban working class. At



the same time the countryside was in turmoil. Peasants, often returning armed from the front as deserters, demanded the land they believed to be theirs by ancient right.

The Bolsheviks under the guidance of Lenin and Trotsky were able to exploit this host of spontaneously engendered grievances on a platform of 'Land, Peace and Bread', and seized power in October 1917, despite the fact that they were far from securing the support of a majority of the population, as the subsequent elections to the Constituent Assembly made clear. (The Social Revolutionaries, a peasant-based party, secured more votes than any other political group.) However, unlike the Social Revolutionaries the Bolsheviks formed a tightly organised and coherent political party. Even more significantly their support was concentrated in the urban centres, whence real political power emanated, and was not dispersed throughout the vastness of the Russian countryside [167; 171; 174; 175; 185; 189; 190; 195].

Whatever we may now think of subsequent developments in the USSR, not least in the light of the momentous events taking place in Eastern Europe during 1989–90, it is important to realise that in the years immediately following the October Revolution it was seen by workers of various political persuasions in many different countries as a real act of liberation for the previously oppressed. The revolution was interpreted less as a seizure of power by a party (the Bolsheviks) claiming to represent workers than as an actual working-class seizure of political power for the first time in history. Organs of working-class self-government (the soviets) seemed to be in control in the factories and the localities. The capitalists were expropriated, the banks and large firms taken over by the revolutionary government and the land redistributed to the long-suffering Russian peasantry.

In the wake of the hardship generated by the war and expressing the long-standing aspiration of the working class of Central Europe for democratic reform and social change, Austria, Germany and Hungary also experienced revolutionary upheavals in 1918–19 led by armed groups of workers who formed after the soviet model their own workers' councils. In none of these cases did revolution result in a full-blown socialist revolution or the destruction of the capitalist system.



However, in both Austria and Germany sweeping democratic reforms were introduced which enabled their respective socialist parties to play a major role in national, regional and local government. The Social Democrats were to exploit this new role to bring about fundamental changes in the relationship between workers and their employers and to engineer social reform for the benefit of the less advantaged sections of society. In central government in Austria until 1920 they brought about changes in labour legislation which enforced the recognition of trade unions, gave workers legal recourse against unfair dismissal, and improved working conditions. They further introduced welfare reforms, which benefited elderly, sick and unemployed people. After the Austrian Social Democrats found themselves in opposition at the national level, they none the less still ran that jewel of socialist achievement in inter-war Europe, 'Red Vienna'. The city became a byword for decent welfare provision and council-house building for workers [31; 33; 40].

Germany's Weimar Republic has often been derided as a failed experiment in democracy on unfruitful soil, but it was far more than that and created one of the most advanced welfare states of its time. The SPD, often in collaboration with the labour wing of the Catholic Centre Party, introduced legislation which reduced the length of the working day, increased pension and sickness benefits and created a completely new system of unemployment insurance and labour exchanges. (Before the First World War the only really effective job-placing agencies had been controlled by employers' organisations, except in the case of some groups of skilled workers, for whom the trade unions were able to play a similar role.) Germany's system of industrial relations was also utterly transformed in this period. Employers, especially those in heavy industry, had been notoriously unwilling to deal with unions or engage in collective bargaining before the First World War. Now they had to recognise the unions: agreements negotiated with those unions were legally binding. Dismissals of fifty workers or more had to be agreed with the appropriate government ministry. Those to be sacked was a matter for discussion between the employer and a new body created by law in 1920, the factory council, which represented

a firm's employees. Workers were not be dismissed on grounds of age, sex, religion or political conviction; workers and their representatives had recourse to labour courts if they believed their legal rights had been transgressed. The Weimar Republic also possessed a system of state arbitration in industrial disputes; in certain cases the government-appointed arbiter's decision could be made binding on both parties. At least until 1928 such arbitration seems to have benefited labour, or certainly its less skilled echelons, not least because the judges appointed by the Ministry of Labour were either social democrats or members of that section of the Centre Party which stood close to the Christian Trade Unions. Thus German workers were far less at the mercy of their employers or a hostile state, at least until the depression, than they had been under the old Empire [113; 115].

The French Third Republic of the inter-war years witnessed no such sweeping reform, not least because, with the exception of the short-lived *Cartel des Gauches* in the mid-1920s, electoral successes of the left were few and far between at national level. However, the triumph of the Popular Front (an alliance of communists, socialists and radicals) changed the situation dramatically in 1936. A set of agreements reached under governmental pressure at the Matignon Palace between employers' representatives and the trade unions increased wage levels, reduced the length of the working week to forty hours, introduced paid holidays and obliged the employers to recognise and negotiate with unions. Britain too had its first experience of Labour government (on two occasions) between the wars. Despite the fact that Labour was in office for only a short time, there none the less ensued some significant gains for the British working class. The first Labour government of 1924 took certain steps to tackle the already serious problem of unemployment, extending the system of unemployment benefits. Of equal if not more significance was the introduction of a Housing Act, which provided subsidies for council-house building. That welfare reform also came to Scandinavia in these years is scarcely surprising: by 1939 socialists participated in the governments of Denmark, Norway and Sweden. It was in Sweden that perhaps the most impressive set of reforms were initiated by

its first all-socialist government. Per Albin Hansson's Cabinet introduced legislation which provided for the establishment of a public works programme of job creation, created a system of pensions and unemployment relief, reduced the length of the working week, set up a scheme of maternity benefits and developed a national medical service [3; 42; 73; 76].

Thus the fact that only Russia witnessed a full-scale socialist revolution of sorts did not mean that the European labour movement in general was totally without influence. The political representatives of the working class were for a time successful in introducing welfare reform in certain countries. In the cases of Britain and Sweden there was no going back. In most countries, however, such as Italy, and subsequently Germany, Austria and Spain, not to mention the whole of Eastern Europe, gains were soon lost and the labour movement viciously destroyed. The European working class did not inherit the earth.

## **Shattered illusions**

Only in Russia did a party claiming to represent the exclusive interests of the industrial working class succeed in destroying the capitalist economic system and socialising the means of production. Yet even here the hopes initially associated with Lenin and the Bolsheviks soon turned sour. With the passage of time the Russian Communist Party became an autocratic body, increasingly remote from those it claimed to represent. This development culminated, of course, in the dominance of Joseph Stalin in the late 1920s, the destruction of internal party democracy, the bloody elimination of potential rivals and a war waged against a recalcitrant peasantry in the collectivisation campaigns of the late 1920s and early 1930s. The transformation of the USSR into a major industrial power in the 1930s was from one point of view a massive achievement, but it was one which demanded massive sacrifices from the Russian working class as well as other groups in society.

Whether the emergence of an autocratic and terroristic state apparatus in the USSR was an inevitable consequence of

Marxist-Leninist theory, as some believe [196], is open to question. What is certainly true is that the failure of *international* revolution, upon which Lenin and Trotsky placed their hopes (unlike Stalin, who conjured up the concept of 'socialism in one country' in the mid-1920s), left the Russian revolutionary government isolated. It was now confronted by the task of attempting to create an industrial *and* socialist order in a country dominated by agriculture and in the face of an increasingly hostile peasantry, which still constituted the mass of the population. Under such circumstances the development of a genuinely democratic polity was scarcely likely. Tendencies towards authoritarian government were further strengthened by the intervention of the Western powers during a bloody civil war, in which the Bolshevik regime had to defend itself against reactionary forces. One consequence of this desperate situation was the emergence under Trotsky's auspices of 'war communism', a development which witnessed increased central government control at the expense of institutions of workers' self-government. This last process, which Trotsky somewhat ironically was later to christen 'substitutionism' (meaning the party came to replace the working class as ruler of the USSR) was additionally compounded by the destruction of much of the original vanguard of working-class militants during the campaigns of the Red Army in the civil war [167; 168; 169; 170; 171; 172; 195; 196; 199].

Elsewhere it was the case not only that socialist revolution failed to occur but also that the labour movement quickly found itself on the retreat. In France the labour insurgency of 1919–20, involving a huge increase in strike action, was brought under control by the mass dismissal of strikers and an intransigent line taken by the Third Republic's most right-wing government since 1871. In Italy the *biennio rosso*, two years of factory occupation in the industrial north and land seizures in the countryside, were quashed by an alliance of conservative and fascist forces. Subsequently Mussolini destroyed independent (non-fascist) labour organisations. In Germany and Austria, as we have seen already, socialists did participate in national government for a time and were responsible for various welfare reforms. However, even before



Hitler became German Chancellor at the end of January 1933 many of those reforms had been reversed by conservative presidential Cabinets between 1930 and the Nazi seizure of power. Thereafter the Third Reich ruthlessly destroyed – or at least attempted to destroy – any vestiges of socialist labour organisation. Communists and Social Democrats were imprisoned, if they were lucky. The less fortunate were thrown into concentration camps and thousands were murdered by the agents of the Nazi state. Again in Austria, before *Anschluss* with Hitler's Germany, social democracy had suffered a disastrous defeat in the civil war of 1934 at the hands of clerical and fascist reaction. Austrian democracy lay in ruins; the same fate befell most of Eastern Europe, where, as in Poland and Hungary, reactionary authoritarian regimes stamped out socialist organisations. Even in France and Britain labour was in general less successful than it might have expected. The extent of social reform remained limited, and electoral successes rare. Chapter 4 seeks to explain these developments and to understand why the European proletariat failed to reach what had appeared in 1917–18 as the promised land.



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## 4 Division and Defeat

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### **The failure of socialist revolution**

Lenin and most of the Bolsheviks believed that the Russian Revolution of October 1917 was but the prelude to a series of international upheavals which would engulf the industrial world and Germany, with its massive socialist movement, in particular. In fact no serious attempt at a revolutionary seizure of power was ever mounted in Britain, Belgium, Holland and the Scandinavian countries (with the exception of Finland). In Italy the 'red years' resulted not in proletarian triumph but in fascist reaction. Central Europe, and Germany's Weimar Republic in particular, did witness a series of left-wing insurrections between 1918 and 1923; in fact the German Communist Party (KPD) became the largest communist party in the world outside the USSR. Yet attempts to overthrow capitalism in Central Europe foundered. The insurrectionists were defeated by police, regular and irregular armies, sometimes but not always in league with fascist groups, and the concerted efforts of the European bourgeoisie, who successfully 'recast' the continent in their interests (Charles Maier). All of this raises the obvious but important question: why did the Russian revolutionary example remain unique, despite its initial attraction to significant numbers of workers in several European countries, especially in France, Germany and Italy, after the First World War? In Spain too socialist electoral victories, accompanied by extremely radical working-class action in cities such as Barcelona, produced in reaction a bloody civil war, whose victor turned out to be Franco!

Part of the key to an understanding of the failure of socialist revolution outside Soviet Russia lies not so much in labour's own weakness and divisions, to be discussed below, but in the

strength and behaviour of its enemies. As Lenin himself pointed out in *The State and Revolution*, the mere existence of grievances on the part of the industrial working class of any country is not in itself enough to guarantee a successful revolutionary outcome, though it may explain why some workers become involved in revolutionary politics. What needs to exist, argued Lenin (quite correctly), is a general sense of grievance amongst the population at large (that is not just restricted to factory workers) combined with a regime which has *already* been weakened and whose supporters are no longer in a position of strength. Where such preconditions are not fulfilled the prospects of successful proletarian revolution remain most unlikely. Not surprisingly and for a variety of reasons, such a situation *did* characterise Tsarist Russia in 1917.

First, the authorities had discredited themselves in the eyes of the Russian people through their shambolic conduct of the war and the material hardship it engendered. The regime was racked by internal divisions and a host of scandals, not least those associated with the monk Rasputin. Second, by 1917 the army was neither capable nor willing to put down the protests of workers and peasants by force of arms, as it had done during the Revolution of 1905–6 after an initial delay. Third, the specific structure of Russian society at this time offered little in the way of support for either the Tsarist autocracy in the February of 1917 or for that matter for the governments which succeeded the absolutist state between then and the following October. There simply did not exist in Russia a sizeable, influential and independent middle class on account of the particular nature of the country's industrialisation in the last decades before the First World War. The absence of such a bourgeoisie was a consequence of the dominant role played by either foreign capital or the Russian state in the process of industrial growth. This point, which was crucial to Trotsky's account of developments in the first chapter of his *History of the Russian Revolution*, was if anything reinforced by the role of state orders for armaments during the First World War. As a result the Russian bourgeoisie was relatively weak in comparison to the situation in more advanced industrial countries, where it played a major role in the suppression of left-wing insurrection.



On the other hand revolutionary forces were remarkably strong in the Russian Empire, especially during the war. The intelligentsia had long constituted a revolutionary threat to government: to be an intellectual in Russia was almost by definition to be an opponent of the old order, as the role of intellectuals in all radical groupings (not only the Bolshevik Party) testifies. The peasant masses of the Empire were no more happy with their lot with their collectivist traditions and belief that the land belonged to them. Attempts begun by the minister Stolypin to encourage the formation of a class of wealthy and efficient peasant-farmers (*kulaks*) broke down not only as a result of his untimely death but also on the rocks of village redistributive traditions. Such attempts had made little headway by 1914 and were in any case cut short by war. Had they been successful, as Lenin recognised (amongst others), then a class might have developed in the countryside committed to capitalist values and non-revolutionary politics.

The contrast between the Russian situation and that in countries such as Britain, France, Italy and Germany could hardly have been greater. In the first place Britain and France had emerged from the war as victors: thus a major factor, which destroyed the legitimacy of several regimes in the eyes of their populace and which served as a major spur to political radicalism in the empires of Central and Eastern Europe, was removed. Long-term traditions of democratic consensus in Britain and France (reflected in the fact that the major opposition parties were none the less loyal to the prevailing parliamentary systems) constituted further props of governmental stability in states under no real threat of extinction. Of course, things were rather different and far less stable in the post-war democracies of Italy and Weimar Germany. The 'red years' of 1919–20 in Italy saw massive strike waves in the industrial cities of the north, factory occupations, especially in Turin, the formation of a Communist Party (PCI) in the same area, and land seizures by *braccianti* (rural labourers) in the countryside. Again, however, the socialist revolutionaries were unable to impose their will upon the Italian population at large. The 'red wave', which in any case had not enjoyed the support of trade union leaders and the reformist politicians of the PSI, proved extremely short lived. In the country-

side landowners, including many peasant farmers, reacted violently against what they saw as the robbery of their property and employed fascist thugs to drive the labourers into submission with great brutality. Significantly the forces of 'law and order' (army, police and government agencies) stood idly by while these campaigns against social change were mounted – or worse, they gave active support to the crushing of rural revolution. The lesson was not lost upon Italy's urban bourgeoisie. Although fascist *squadristi* were only rarely allowed by employers to enter their factories, the beating-up of socialist politicians and trade union leaders became increasingly common. The fact that factory occupations, strikes and industrial militancy were overwhelmingly concentrated in Turin and Milan further exposed the revolutionary left to isolation and defeat [146; 147; 148; 149; 156; 157; 158; 159; 161; 164].

In Germany too there were a series of risings between 1919 and 1923, in which various political groupings and radical sections of the working class attempted to seize power and transform the country into a genuinely socialist state. Again, however, such risings were in no way centrally co-ordinated and took place in different parts of Germany at different points in time, thus rendering their suppression by counter-revolutionary forces relatively easy. Radical action on the part of some workers once again generated a fierce and successful resistance from other sections of society, from the state, the police and the army. Even before the regular armed forces could be reconstructed after the war (the army had simply melted away after returning across the Rhine in December 1918 as the men chose to go home for Christmas), over 400,000 Germans volunteered to fight in the so-called Free Corps against the threat of socialist revolution. Unlike Russia, Germany possessed a large and powerful professional and industrial middle class, a sizeable lower-middle class of small businessmen and independent craftsmen, and a peasantry which had owned the land from the mid-nineteenth century at the latest. Not only was it the case that such propertied groups were most unlikely to lend their support to revolutionary adventures, but also many of them had already been mobilised or mobilised themselves against the threat that emanated

from the German Social Democratic Party even before the outbreak of the First World War. Thus the social democrats, who enjoyed a share of national government between 1918 and 1923 and who resolutely refused to support left-wing insurrections, indeed who even colluded in their repression, despite their party's ostensible commitment to a programme of social revolution, may well have been right in their assessment that any attempt to socialise the Germany economy in the immediate future would have led to a disastrous civil war, in which it would not be the working class which emerged as victor [99; 102; 103; 112; 113; 123; 127; 128; 131; 137; 141; 142].

Events elsewhere seemed to confirm this gloomy prognosis, as we have already seen in the case of Italy. In Austria the civil war of 1934 saw even a *united* labour movement (one not characterised by the fateful division between communists and social democrats) destroyed at the hands of the army, police, Church and fascism [31; 34; 37; 41]. The gains of the Spanish left in the elections of 1931 and even more in 1936 also unleashed a vicious reaction which led to the defeat of the socialist forces; this despite the fact that revolutionary workers in the urban centres were joined in their desire for radical social change by the rural labourers of Andalusia and Extremadura. The army, church, large landowners and the Spanish bourgeoisie, united behind Franco and aided by notorious Italian and German contingents, proved more than a match for the left [202; 204; 205; 206; 207; 208; 211; 214; 217; 218; 219].

What is clear from all of this is that whatever labour's own failings, which will be discussed below, part of the reason for the defeat and in some cases destruction of the revolutionary left resides in the strength – financial, military, and simply numerical – of anti-socialist forces. It is all too easy to imagine that 'the working class' had history on its side because it was more numerous than any other class, for most European states possessed social structures of great complexity. From the turn of the century the most rapidly growing occupational group was that of white-collar, rather than manual, workers: the political behaviour of this sector of society was rarely identical to that of its blue-collar counterpart. Second, with the excep-

tion of Britain, where urban industrial life was the norm for most wage-earners, many in continental Europe still earned their livelihood from the land. With certain exceptions in parts of France and Italy discussed above, the labour movement invariably had difficulty recruiting support from the countryside. The significance of this is clear even in Germany, which would normally be regarded as an advanced industrial country by this time. In 1925 still around a quarter of the country's active labour force was employed in agriculture. Germany's occupational structure at this time reveals another aspect of social stratification which acted as a barrier to the triumph of the left: over a half of all those categorised as 'workers' lived not in large industrial cities, which formed the bastions of labour organisation, but in small towns and villages of under 10,000 inhabitants. Such workers were rarely to be found in the socialist ranks; some of them turned to the Nazis between 1930 and 1933 [114]. Furthermore even in the German case modern techniques of production based in large factories were far from typical of all sectors of industry. The occupational census of 1925 shows that around one-third of all those engaged in 'Industry and Handicrafts' were either self-employed or worked in firms employing five people or fewer. Here again the labour movement was weak, as it was in branches characterised by domestic (cottage) production, such as parts of the Saxon textile industry, the manufacture of toys and musical instruments, and shoe-making in the town of Pirmasens in the Palatinate [115]. Thus the labour *movement* was never coterminous with labour in general. Many workers remained outside its ranks; some gave their support to non- or even anti-socialist organisations, as in the numerous working-class Tory voters in Lancashire, the Krupp workers who voted Nationalist or the industrial workers of the Rhineland who were Catholic and gave their support to the Centre Party.

So far we have seen that the failure of socialist revolution outside the USSR was on the one hand the result of the strength of counter-revolutionary forces and on the other a consequence of the fact that those groups of workers mobilised by socialist organisations never constituted anything like a majority of the active population. A further factor is undoubtedly to be found in the divisions which rent labour



organisations asunder in the inter-war years. The *biennio rosso* factory occupations in Italy were restricted to the northern industrial region and Turin in particular. Those involved took action against the wishes of the official and cautious trade union leadership, while Italian socialism was divided into communist, socialist and syndicalist wings. Even the revolutionary left could not agree amongst themselves as to what constituted the most viable strategy, with some adhering to a Leninist model of revolution and others placing more faith in the spontaneous ability of workers to seize power in the factories for themselves. At the very base of the movement there were tensions between skilled workers, who sought to reclaim the privileged status that had been partly eroded during the war years, and less skilled workers, and between residents and migrant workers from other parts of Italy [146; 149; 158; 159]. Between 1918 and 1923 the German labour movement also suffered from multiple divisions. The SPD had split in 1917 with the formation of the more radical and anti-war Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD). This latter party was in turn internally divided, including in its ranks figures as diverse as Eduard Bernstein, the high-priest of revisionism, Karl Kautsky, the 'centrist' defender of Marxist doctrine, and the radical Rosa Luxemburg. Within such a party there was absolutely no agreement on the way forward; even some of those in the USPD who did believe in the principle of socialist revolution held such a deterministic (fatalistic) view of historical development that they could state that 'revolutions are not made, they simply happen' (Hugo Haase). Needless to say, this attitude was scarcely helpful in a moment of revolutionary upheaval. Not surprisingly the USPD itself also split in late December 1918, with Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht and other members of the Spartacus group leaving to form the German Communist Party (KPD) in alliance with certain other less well-known radical groups from Bremen, Hamburg and Berlin, which had already led an existence outside both the SPD and the USPD since the middle of the war.

Unfortunately from the point of view of the revolutionary left, the list of divisions within the German labour movement given above is far from exhaustive. The Communist Party in

its early days bore no resemblance to Lenin's Bolshevik organisation. First, the party embraced a variety of political positions, as became clear at its founding congress, where Luxemburg found herself in a minority on several major issues and where anti-parliamentary, syndicalist voices were many and loud. Second, the new party had nothing like Lenin's clarity of vision, what might be described as 'revolutionary realism': Luxemburg's dislike of tight central discipline, generated by what she had earlier identified as the bureaucratic inertia of the SPD and the Free Trade Unions, together with her trust in the spontaneity of the proletarian masses, proved of little help at the decisive hour, which also saw her and Karl Liebknecht brutally murdered at the hands of the Free Corps during the so-called Spartacus rising of January 1919 in Berlin. Subsequently (in 1920) some of the ultra-leftists broke away from the KPD to form the yet more radical Communist Workers' Party (KAPD), while even this 'left-communist' organisation was out-flanked by various syndicalist groups which had some success in recruiting dockers in Hamburg and miners in the Ruhr [99; 102; 103; 105; 110; 112; 127; 128; 131; 137; 141; 142]. Against the powerful forces of the right such a divided revolutionary movement had no chance of success, although we have already seen that even a united socialist movement's chances would still have been limited by the middle class and other social groups in Weimar Germany.

The possibility of revolutionary success may have been somewhat greater in Spain, where radicalism was not simply restricted to the urban centres. Here again, however, the left was seriously weakened by internal divisions. The long-standing enmity between the Socialist Party (PSOE) and the anarcho-syndicalists in the CNT remained. The increasing strength during the Civil War of the Communist Party, which became the principal source of Soviet weaponry for the republican forces and hence increasingly important, added another element of confusion. So did the creation of a Trotskyist party (POUM) openly critical of the communists. At the same time the Socialist Party was rent with increasingly bitter tensions between cautious reformists around Prieto and the revolutionary followers of Largo Caballero, whose radical

position was bolstered by a large influx of rural labourers from Andalusia and Extremadura into the party in the 1930s. Thus while Franco held the anti-republican forces together, the revolutionary groups often came to blows, most infamously in Barcelona in the May and August of 1937 in the 'civil war within a civil war' [202; 204; 207; 211; 214; 218].

Thus in few countries was the revolutionary left, which had to confront such powerful counter-revolutionary forces, united. The split of European labour into mutually hostile communist and socialist wings was an aspect of working-class disunity that not only made the prospect of socialist revolution dim but also in some places actually facilitated the destruction of labour organisations by their enemies. It is to the origins of this split that we now turn.

## European Communism

As we have already seen, the rise of separate Communist Parties in competition with socialist or social democratic organisations was a central aspect of the history of European labour in the inter-war years and a major source of working-class weakness in the face of its many and powerful enemies. Outside the USSR the largest Communist Party, and one which had been founded in late 1918 *before* Lenin created the Third International (the Comintern), was to be found in Germany, where the KPD could already muster around 3 million votes in the Reichstag elections of May 1924. Although its level of support wavered in the next four years the German Communist Party remained a mass organisation and its popularity, especially with unemployed people, soared in the world economic crisis of 1929–33. In November 1932 in the depths of the Depression almost 6 million voters gave their support to the party, which in several parts of industrial Germany had replaced social democracy as the authentic voice of working-class discontent [110; 113; 120; 123]. The French Communist Party was formed at the Tours Congress of 1920, when two-thirds of the delegates voted to affiliate to the Bolshevik Third International and thus create the new party. Its fortunes then went into decline, while the Socialist



Party (SFIO) enjoyed a rapid recovery. The formation of the Popular Front in the mid-1930s to fight the ostensible threat of French fascism, however, saw a tremendous improvement in the fortunes of the PCF. In the elections of 1936 the Communist Party candidates polled extremely well, especially in the newer centres of industrial production [73; 76; 84; 97; 98]. In Italy the Socialist Party, when confronted with the decision as to whether to affiliate to Lenin's Third International, also split into competing wings; while in Spain the Communist Party, which had been of relatively little significance before the outbreak of the Civil War in 1936, did become more important during that conflict as it dealt ruthlessly with many of its own supposed allies on the republican side [20; 146; 158; 202; 204; 207].

Chapter 3 attempted to describe the roots of these various Communist Parties, roots which in some cases can be traced back to the existence of radical socialist party branches, groups and traditions before the outbreak of war in 1914, as in parts of Italy, France and Germany. The many divisions between Marxists and non-Marxists, radicals and reformists, revolutionaries and non-revolutionaries, which had been so characteristic of the SFIO, PSI and SPD before the war, became increasingly clear as the parties had to adopt a stance towards the prosecution of war by their respective governments and then towards the actions of the Russian revolutionary government of the Bolsheviks after 1917. Above all Lenin's creation of the Third International and the rigorous twenty-one conditions of entry to that organisation rendered reconciliation between less radical social democrats and revolutionary communists more or less unbridgeable.

The division of the European labour movement into two hostile camps was more than just a consequence of the historical developments described above, however. To some – albeit limited – extent that division reflected a set of structural divisions within the European working class. One of these was of a generational nature: support for radical initiatives in Turin and Berlin often came from younger workers, sometimes ones new to industrial life, whereas the caution of trade union leaders and social democratic politicians was partly the response of an older generation. Younger miners in the Ruhr



and engineering workers in northern Italy were in the forefront of factory seizures and the campaign for the socialisation of the mines, though their ability to sustain protest over any lengthy period of time was debatable and the roots of their radicalism shallow [1; 20; 84; 103; 112; 123; 149]. The tension between the working-class generations also mirrored significant changes taking place in methods of industrial production. In France and in Germany the respective Communist Parties tended to win a good deal of support in arcas of new industry, as did the PCI in Italy. Often it was from the large factories of the engineering industry, as in Turin, Berlin and the outskirts of Paris, that radicalism recruited its followers from amongst semi-skilled workers [1; 13; 73; 76; 84; 103; 112; 123; 149]. It is worth noting, however, that much as the growth of new industrial areas and modern technology may have produced some workers inclined to revolutionary politics, there were various ways in which an associated restructuring of the labour force could prove disadvantageous for the prospects of the European working class. First, as already stated, the radicalism of the young was often of short duration: the organisations of the ultra-left were to go into sharp decline in Germany after a brief existence between 1919 and 1923 [99; 113; 128], while the factory occupations that occurred in Italy in 1920 were of an even shorter duration [149]. In general there was a marked decline in most of the indices of labour militancy in Britain and France after 1920-1, testified by the dramatic decline in strike action and numbers of those organised in trade unions. In Italy the 'red years' were followed almost immediately by fascist triumphs, first at a local and then at a national level. Significantly the apparent loss of working-class muscle in these three countries coincided with the end of the post-war boom and the onset, especially in Britain, of unemployment. For a variety of reasons, not least those associated with high levels of inflation and the consequent loss of the mark's value on international markets, which made German goods extremely cheap abroad and foreign goods very expensive at home, the Weimar Republic's post-war boom lasted until 1923, when a combination of hyperinflation, mass unemployment in the later part of the year and the occupation of the Ruhr by French and Belgian troops

seeking to enforce reparation payments brought economic collapse. Significantly strike action, trade union organisation and left-wing insurrection in Germany had all peaked during the tight labour market of the boom (1919 to early 1923). Thereafter all went into sharp decline in the wake of the so-called stabilisation crisis of 1923–4, when many firms went bankrupt and over 20 per cent of the labour force was thrown out of work. Thus the labour insurgency of the immediate post-war period had been – somewhat ironically – predicated upon the strength of workers. Large-scale unemployment served to destroy that strength and demobilise labour, a fact that was to be repeated in the Depression, as we shall see below.

One cause of structural unemployment that remained high in countries such as Britain, Austria and Germany, even in the not-so-golden mid-1920s, was precisely the processes of technological modernisation associated with the advent of the semi-skilled workers mentioned above. In the first place the ‘rationalisation’ of industry, which involved the closure of smaller and less efficient units of production (‘negative rationalisation’, as some trade union leaders and socialist politicians dubbed it), led to many workers losing their jobs directly. The partial Taylorisation of car plants, sections of the electro-technical industry, chemicals and food-processing, together with increased mechanisation of textile and shoe manufacture also reduced the demand for labour independently of the fluctuations of the business cycle; the surplus of available labour was used by employers to sack ‘trouble-makers’, break wage agreements and either hire new workers who were less demanding or rehire former workers but at newly negotiated and lower rates of payment. The ability of firms to discipline their labour forces was further facilitated by the fact that changes in techniques of production weakened the position of skilled labour, previously the backbone of labour organisation, upon whom they had hitherto been dependent. The acceleration of task subdivision in factories, implementation of individual bonus payments, increased supervision through time and motion studies, all of these things increased the relative power of employers in the mid-1920s. Significantly the newest and most automated car plants of Britain and France produced a labour force that was

relatively quiescent, at least initially. Once again the newness of the labour force could act as a deterrent to mobilisation both in the factories and new working-class suburbs, as on the outskirts of Paris, where it took time for a consciousness of class solidarity to emerge [1; 36; 54; 67; 84; 115; 149].

The division between social democracy and communism was in part related to these structural socio-economic changes. It would be very misleading, however, to imagine that the generation gap or skill differences were in themselves a sufficient explanation of the *political* division of European labour between the wars. Some skilled workers were to be found in the ranks of Communist Parties: engineers in Paris, Berlin and Turin, cutlers in Remscheid and Solingen, German pipe-fitters. At the same time some groups of unskilled workers, as in the case of textile workers in the older industrial areas of France, Italy and Germany, remained loyal to older socialist organisations [20; 73; 76; 84; 103; 123]. To explain why some workers turned to radical left-wing politics and were or became dissatisfied with the caution of social democracy, therefore, we need to look at other factors.

Perhaps the most obvious factor which radicalised some sections of European labour after 1918, as it had during the First World War, was material deprivation. It cannot be doubted that the massive economic difficulties of the inter-war period fuelled working-class radicalism and support for communist organisations. First came the inflation immediately after the war. In France and Italy workers saw the value of their earnings eroded by rising prices. In Austria the post-war inflation was even more serious; in Germany the situation became desperate with the onset of hyperinflation, which made the currency more or less worthless. The mid-1920s saw a stabilisation of prices, often in the wake of drastic currency reform, but these years were far from 'golden' for many employees. Stabilisation was often accompanied by the collapse of businesses and consequent unemployment. Rationalisation thereafter brought about structural unemployment, especially in Austria and Germany, while for those working in the newly automated plants the pace of work increased and the rate of industrial accidents accelerated. Above all there came in the world economic crisis of 1929-33



the pestilence of mass and long-term unemployment, which reached its most spectacular proportions once again in Weimar Germany. In the April of 1932 over 6 million people were registered as unemployed (that is approximately one-third of the total labour force) by the Ministry of Labour. Not surprisingly there existed a strong correlation between such mass unemployment and support for the KPD, with around 80 per cent of the party jobless in 1932. In Britain the National Minority Movement, led by some members of the Communist Party, enjoyed some success in mobilising unemployed people, though on nothing like the same scale [20; 36; 46; 58; 67; 73; 84; 93; 109; 110; 113; 114; 115; 123].

Once again, however, any attempt to explain the rise of European Communism simply in terms of the economic problems which workers had to confront encounters serious difficulties. Most obviously the undoubted plight of Britain's unemployed people after 1921, expressed most dramatically in the famous hunger marches of the 1920s and 1930s, did *not* result in any mass desertion of the British working class from the Labour Party to the Communist Party. Even at the very nadir of the Depression in 1932 the British Communist Party could count no more than 6,000 members [67]. Perhaps even more strangely – from the point of view of economic explanations of communist support – the Austrian First Republic failed to produce a mass communist movement, even during the economic crisis of 1929–33. Austrian social democracy retained its support and remained united. These two cases suggest the following: first, for the growth of successful (in terms of numbers of workers mobilised) communist movements between the wars there *already* needed to exist a radical/socialist culture. As we have already seen, this was the case in parts of France, Italy and Germany before the outbreak of war in 1914, though there can also be no doubt that the events of 1914–18 further served to radicalise labour. The PCF, PCI and KPD thus inherited an extant radical working-class culture. Second, as the Austrian example demonstrates, the behaviour of social democrats in government was often crucial for the fortunes of the communist rival. The Austrian Social Democratic Party did not split into hostile camps after the war, not least because it did not behave in the same way as



its German counterpart when it held the reigns of power immediately after the First World War: it did not deploy armed reactionaries, in the shape of either Free Corps or the regular troops, against some supposed 'Bolshevik threat', but rather created a people's militia, which consisted primarily of its own membership [31; 33]. In Germany, on the other hand, the SPD's Minister of Defence, Gustav Noske, organised the Free Corps, which recruited primarily from anti-socialist groups and former army officers and earned the label of the 'bloodhound of the revolution' from left-wing insurrectionaries. It was these paramilitary organisations, often enjoying financial support from industrial circles, which crushed the Spartacist rising in Berlin at the end of January 1919 and played a role in anti-strike actions in the Ruhr in 1919–20 against miners demanding the socialisation of their industry. The SPD participated in governments organising such counter-revolutionary activities and played a role also in sending the army to remove 'workers' governments' (joint social democratic and communist coalitions) from the states of Saxony and Thuringia in 1923. Such behaviour alienated the support of radical sections of the working class, who desired the immediate expropriation of their employers and deserted first to the Independent Socialists and subsequently to the Communist Party. Support for the KPD was further fuelled by the attitude of Free Trade Union leaders (closely associated with the SPD) and social democratic politicians to the process of industrial rationalisation described above. In part the consequence of the old Marxist belief that technological modernisation equated with progress, even in its capitalistic form, in part a reflection of the great rise in working-class living standards in the wake of 'Fordism' – the unions actually sent a delegation to the USA to study the phenomenon in the mid-1920s – these functionaries saw rationalisation as something essentially positive in its consequences. The actual impact of rationalisation in the German case was, of course, quite different: for those in work increased pressure and supervision, for others joblessness. This situation was exploited by the KPD in its criticism of social democrats, as was the SPD's position during the Depression. Fearful of any policy that might rock the boat of the Weimar system and in

particular lend added weight to its denunciation by the Nazis, and offering no concept of alternative economic policies, the leadership of German social democracy 'tolerated' the deflationary economic policies of the Cabinets of Chancellor Brüning between 1930 and 1932, which began to dismantle some aspects of the welfare state, reduced wages and did nothing to improve the lot of unemployed people. In local and regional government the SPD participated in the dismissal of council workers and government employees in the severe financial crisis generated by the Depression, while social democratic police chiefs repressed demonstrations of communists and unemployed people. It was precisely such actions, especially by the SPD police commander in Berlin, Zörgiebel, in May 1929, when action against demonstrators led to several days of riots and over forty fatalities, which gave some degree of credence to the KPD's denunciation of its rival for working-class support as an agent of the prevailing political and social system [100; 101; 102; 110; 115; 120; 129; 137].

The above is not meant to imply that the German Social Democratic Party 'betrayed' some monolithic mythical entity called '*the* German working class'. The fact that the SPD retained the support of many workers in the Weimar Republic already shows such a generalisation to be false. Its moderation was clearly not without its attractions to some. Equally that moderation could be justified in the immediate post-war period by the fact that revolutionary adventures might have led to a disastrous civil war and the destruction of the German labour movement, while the toleration of Brüning's deflationary economic policies might also be seen as a legitimate attempt to prevent power slipping to Hitler and his supporters. It remains the case, however, that such caution was not to the liking of those who desired some form of revolutionary social change or to unemployed people, the real victims of economic crisis. The disillusioned folk amongst the working class vented their disgust in their support for the ultra-leftist politics of German Communism.

Whatever the reasons for the attraction of Communism may have been to various groups of European workers, there is no doubt that it grew in the years of Depression. While the Bolshevik Revolution seemed to remain as the only successful

example of a 'proletarian' seizure of power, the influence and authority of the USSR grew within the ranks of revolutionaries. Initially many of the individual Communist Parties had not been subservient to Russia. As already mentioned more than once, the KPD had been formed before the Third International and contained figures such as Rosa Luxemburg who were none too enamoured of Bolshevik practice. The PCF at its inception at the Congress of Tours in 1920 included syndicalists, who saw in the Russian example workers' control, not party domination, and peasant representatives, who were simply fed up with the agrarian policy of the French Socialist Party (SFIO). However, from the mid-1920s onwards most, if not all, European Communist Parties underwent a process of 'Bolshevisation' or 'Stalinisation'. The more the prospects of domestic revolution receded, the more attractive became the Soviet model. That attraction was further increased in the world economic crisis of 1929–33, when the Russian state demonstrated its superiority to the capitalist world in its own eyes and those of many others by full employment and economic growth. As a result dissident voices were no longer tolerated within the communist ranks; the various national parties became increasingly subservient to Moscow, often reducing their appeal and making them less sensitive to local problems [2; 4; 10; 15; 21; 26; 67; 84; 97; 98; 110; 113; 169; 170].

This division between socialists and communists was undoubtedly one of the factors that enabled the enemies of organised labour to triumph in so many European countries between the wars; for the various Communist Parties seemed to spend at least as much time denouncing their social democratic rivals as they did attacking bourgeois parties and the capitalist system. Co-operation between the two competing wings of the European labour movement became increasingly difficult with the Stalinisation of those Communist Parties and their increasing dependence on instructions from Moscow, as dissident voices and the independent-minded were removed, and central party control of the membership increased. This hostility between communists and social democrats peaked in what the Comintern dubbed the 'Third Period' between 1928 and 1933. The disastrous failure of



co-operation in China between its Communist Party and the supposedly 'progressive' bourgeois Kuomintang, which led to the massacre of thousands of Chinese communists in Shanghai in 1927, together with the radicalisation of Soviet domestic politics associated with the drive against the *kulaks*, discredited the advocates of cautious collaboration with non-communist groups. The Third International under Moscow's direction now declared that the period of capitalist economic stabilisation was at an end. The final collapse of capitalism and social revolution were on the immediate agenda. All that stood between the present iniquitous system and successful proletarian revolution was the activity of social democratic, reformist politicians, who were misleading the international working class away from the revolutionary path. Hence social democracy had become the last bastion of the capitalist system before the oncoming storm and its political leaders were no better than the fascists. Indeed, in communist eyes they were 'social-fascists' [2; 169; 170; 171].

There is no doubt that such a divisive strategy alienated many workers in Britain and France. Significantly the PCF began to do well in France when it abandoned the 'social-fascist' line and joined the Popular Front [10; 67; 73; 76; 84; 97]. Equally obvious is the fact that such an intransigent communist position proved suicidal in the face of the threat of reaction and counter-revolution. This was most clearly the case in the last years of Germany's Weimar Republic, where the Nazis mobilised massive support and Hitler was appointed Chancellor in late January 1933. Despite the misery engendered by mass and long-term unemployment and the fact that Hitler's party was called the National *Socialist Workers'* party, the majority of German manual workers did not turn to Nazism but continued to give their support to either the SPD or KPD, whose combined vote outnumbered that of NSDAP supporters in the Reichstag elections of November 1932. This is not to say that no manual workers voted Nazi: many rural labourers, those living in small provincial towns, craftsmen in small units of production, people employed in cottage industrial production, former members of company unions who had previously voted nationalist, and female labour did lend considerable electoral



support to Hitler; these groups were still numerous in the early 1930s, as we have seen. An important point about such sections of the German working class, however, is that they consisted of people who had rarely been organised previously. Where trade unions, the SPD and KPD had been strong on the other hand, the Nazis fared far less well, something true of the Catholic industrial regions as well. Recent research has also demolished the proposition that manual unemployed workers were prone to Nazi propaganda. On the contrary, these were the Germans least likely to vote for Hitler [114; 115]. Even if the organised working class of Weimar Germany did not desert to the political right, however, it was the case that the split between communists and social democrats prevented effective opposition to Nazism from the left. In this respect the divisive 'social-fascist' line adopted by the KPD, whose leaders perpetually denounced SPD leaders as traitors to the working-class cause, and its perpetual underestimation of the Nazi threat proved fatal.

This said, the tragic division of one of Europe's most powerful labour movements should not be laid entirely at the door of Moscow. In the German case it is significant that support for the KPD reached its peak precisely when it spoke the language of 'social fascism'. It was not only the Communist Party which underestimated the threat of Nazism: so did the SPD, which was itself partly responsible for the implacable hostility between the two parties, which regularly rejected suspect approaches from the communist side and harassed KPD members. In any case the split between the SPD and the KPD deepened in the Depression not simply because of the mistaken policies of their respective leaders but also as a result of the impact of mass and long-term unemployment. Between 1928 and 1933 the two working-class parties in Germany came increasingly to represent different social constituencies. The SPD remained a party of skilled workers largely, while the Communist Party's members were more numerous less skilled and less well-off. The SPD was an organisation of older workers, the KPD one of younger workers. The SPD often recruited support from the new housing estates, which in some cases creamed off more affluent workers from the inner cities, while German Commun-

ism enjoyed some success in the inner-city slums and areas of crime and illegitimacy in contrast to the respectable image of its rival. Above all, 70 per cent of social democrats were in jobs, whereas the KPD became a party, indeed *the* party, of the unemployed. The different sections of the working class represented by the two parties thus had different interests: this compounded their inability to work together.

The impact of the Depression did far more than increase the division between communists and social democrats. It intimidated those in work, for they were so easily replaced. It set employed against unemployed, region against region, pit against pit, worker against worker, male against female labour; although in some cases it radicalised party militants (the street-fighters), in others it led to apathy and resignation. Hitler's ability to contain labour in the following years had been in part prepared by the fragmentation and demoralisation which mass and long-term unemployment brought to the German working class. Similar developments were also noted in Austria [36; 41; 113; 115; 135]. To repeat a point already made, none of the above should be read as implying that a united labour movement in a more favourable economic climate would necessarily have been in a position to lay its numerous and powerful enemies low; without the debilitating effects of unemployment – not only in the Depression – and internal political divisions, however, its fate might not have been so disastrous in so many places.

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## 5 Conclusion

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The advent of the industrial revolution in Britain and its spread throughout Europe produced a new working class, one upon whom the whole economic system relied and which for a time promised to become ever more numerous. As time passed industrial workers began to give political expression to their interests and aspirations. Parties representing or claiming to represent ordinary working men and women emerged as a major consideration in the domestic politics of virtually all European countries. The social welfare reforms of Imperial Germany were a direct consequence of the ruling elite's fear of social democracy and intended to wean workers away from the red menace. In Britain the welfare programme of Liberal governments immediately before the war reflected the need to mobilise working-class votes. That labour leaders were taken into government in Britain and France between 1914 and 1918, and that certain concessions were made to trade union officials even in Germany during the conflict, further testified to the importance of the organisations they represented. After the war socialist participation in the governments of several states, often accompanied by attempts to improve the lot of sick, old and unemployed people, all seemed to promise a more hopeful future for the European working class.

The second half of this book has been a depressing account of the way in which the history of labour has *not* turned out to be a one-track march forward to the promised land. Nowhere was labour organisation ever synonymous with the whole of the working class. Many workers never joined any organisation, industrial or political. Some did give their support to political parties, but these were never invariably of the left. Nationalism, Catholicism and Toryism could always rely on some degree of support in working-class areas. In any case socialist politics took many different forms. From the

beginning there existed tensions, in some cases overt hostility, between those desirous of sweeping revolutionary change and others prepared to work within the system for limited economic, social and political gains. Such divisions became especially apparent in the inter-war years as the labour movement split into social-democratic and communist wings.

Research has increasingly concentrated on these fissures within the European labour movement, on the sources of weakness rather than strength, on occupational, religious, ethnic and gender divisions in the multiple perceptions of the working classes. It has also become increasingly apparent that social-structural developments since the mid-1920s have not favoured traditional labourite politics. The manual working class has been shrinking in size since that time relative to other sections of the population in the advanced industrial states, partly as a result of technological modernisation and the growth of the service sector, a development especially marked in Britain. The constant *re*-formation of the labour force, increasing employment of casual, part-time and female labour to replace former full-time male operatives, and the destruction of traditional working-class residential communities through rehousing have all militated against the triumph of the left; everywhere outside the USSR and the Third World socialist revolution has proved a chimera, apart from those areas of Eastern Europe 'liberated' by the Russians after the Second World War. What successes labour has won have been won in collusion with existing governmental systems rather than against them, except, arguably for the most recent and dramatic developments in the formerly Communist states of Eastern Europe.

It would be wrong, however, to end on a note of unmitigated pessimism. The role of labour parties in the governments of many European states since 1945 was built upon the mobilisation of support in the earlier period. Its great achievement has been the creation and consolidation of the modern welfare state. Despite its numerous critics and the initiatives of Thatcherite governments, this has produced for the great bulk of the population (though by no means all of it) hitherto unprecedented levels of affluence. Without the appearance of working men and women on the political scene such an achievement would scarcely have taken place.



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